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HEGEL AND THE PRESENT OF ART'S PAST CHARACTER

Alberto L. Siani



Hegel and the Present of Art's Past Character

This book reclaims Hegel's notion of the "end of art" – or, more precisely, of "art's past character" – not just as a piece of the history of philosophy but as a living critical and interpretive methodology. It addresses the presence of the past character of art in both Hegel and contemporary philosophy and aesthetics.

The book's innovative contribution lies in unifying the Hegelian thesis with discussions of contemporary art and philosophy. The author not only offers a Hegelian exegesis but also applies the idea of the past character of art to themes that are both related to Hegel's philosophy, such as the French Revolution and the modern state, Kantian aesthetics, and religion and the sacred space disclosed for art, and going beyond Hegel, such as Celan's poetry, Gramsci's criticism of Croce, human rights, and even the grunge rock band Pearl Jam. Conversely, such non-Hegelian explorations will help enlighten what may look like a specific thread of Hegel's aesthetics, but can be used to shed light on some core motives of his philosophy. The author's interpretation of art's past character reclaims the full value, attractiveness, and philosophical soundness of Hegel's thesis, while rejecting its interpretation in terms of a complete dissolution of the aesthetic element into the philosophical one.

Hegel and the Present of Art's Past Character will be of interest to scholars and advanced students working on Hegel, philosophy of art and aesthetics, history of philosophy, political philosophy, and art theory.

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This one is for Čiğdem,
And for when it gets dark softly around us



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Acknowledgements

This book presents to the English-speaking public some research I have been carrying out for several years, part of which has already been published, mostly in German and Italian. The main previous works are listed in the final bibliography and referred to also throughout the book. As for previous works in English, specifically, Chapter 7 of this book derives to a good extent from the articles “Antisubjectivism and the End of Art: Heidegger on Hegel”, in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2020: 60/3, 335–349 and “Hope and Silence. Heidegger and Celan on the Subject of Poetry”, in *Studi di Estetica* 2019: 47, 175–190, whereas Chapter 8 is a reworking of my chapter “No Code Aesthetics”, in *Pearl Jam and Philosophy*. Ed. S. Marino, A. Schembari. London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2022, 109–122. My thanks go to the publishers and editors for their permission to use the material. All previous work, in any case, has been quite substantially re-elaborated and given a unitary, systematic form.

The first foundations for this book had already been laid during my PhD, which I completed in 2010. It would be impossible to name all the people, institutions, places, conversations, conferences, and less formal occasions to which I owe a part, small or big, of the development of those foundations. I can only thank the people who played the biggest role at the very origin and at the very conclusion of this book’s path. The former ones are Leonardo Amoroso (untimely died in 2021), Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, and Michael Quante: to them I owe more than I could ever say with regard to the philosophy of German Idealism and so much else. To the latter group belong two young scholars of (not only Hegelian) aesthetics, namely Nicola Ramazzotto and Elena Romagnoli, whom I would like to thank for their valuable comments on the last draft of the book, two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for the improvement of my book proposal, and Andrew Weckenmann at Routledge for his competent support throughout the process. I have drafted the proposal and indeed first conceived the book while on holiday with my wife and kid in Mordoğan, a small Turkish town on the Aegean Sea, in August 2022. I owe it mainly to the generosity of Meliha and Burhan Karşlı, from my acquired Turkish family, that I was granted the precious gift of having time to work efficiently for this purpose while there.

Introduction

Whether well-disposed or hostile, the reader or scholar of Hegel's philosophy can hardly escape the feeling that some of its arguments and theses, including some of the most important or renowned ones, are so *prima facie* outlandish that they must have been intentionally designed to be controversial. Suffice it to think of the statements about the equivalence of actuality and rationality, or of truth and totality, or about history as the progressive emancipation of the spirit. The thesis of the "end of art", or, more precisely, of "art's past character" (hereinafter referred to as "the thesis"), certainly belongs to them. Briefly, this is the idea that art is no longer able to fulfil a supreme, essential role, since we live in a largely philosophical, prosaic, and disenchanted time. Already perceived as outrageous by some of Hegel's contemporaries, the thesis has been addressed, interpreted, rejected, or otherwise developed from virtually every standpoint in philosophical aesthetics, by authors as prominent and diverse as Nietzsche, Croce, Heidegger, Adorno, Gadamer, Danto, Nancy, and up to Pippin's and Geulen's latest assumptions. In this day and age, the thesis continues to inspire a variety of interpretations and debates and to occupy a remarkable portion of debates in philosophical aesthetics, as well as in art history and criticism. According to the rich history of its interpretations, art is no longer an adequate vehicle for the truth, nor for the presentation of the divine, nor for the embedment of moral and political principles and values, or art has become irrelevant to a technological, commodity-oriented world; or artworks can no longer be beautiful or even distinguishable from common objects, or they are no longer autonomous insofar as they require a non-artistic discourse to be interpreted; and so on.

The originality of my own contribution in this book can, first and foremost, be outlined by very schematically marking its differences from three influential interpretations. Unlike Danto's by now classical enthusiastic appropriation of the thesis in terms of a "philosophical disenfranchisement of art", my interpretation wants to preserve the specificity of the aesthetic element and resist the idea of a full obliteration of art into philosophy

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(Danto 1986, 1998, 2005). Unlike Pippin's convinced dismissal of the thesis as wrong both about art and modernity, my interpretation fully reclaims the validity, if not the truthfulness, of the thesis (Pippin 2014). Unlike Geulen's provocative deflation of the thesis to an ambivalent, though productive, rumour in aesthetics, my interpretation defends its philosophical soundness and rigour (Geulen 2006). While I explicitly discuss Danto and Pippin in Chapter 4, practically the whole book can serve as an implicit counterargument to Geulen, though clearly it cannot be reduced to this. By bringing these initial oppositions together (as well as, of course, the acceptance of several ideas by these and other authors), the guiding motive of this book may be roughly presented as an attempt to reclaim the attractiveness and soundness of Hegel's thesis, not just as a philosophical argument but also as a living critical and interpretive methodology for our time and beyond Hegel, thus tying the two threads together. On the one hand, while starting with a classic Hegelian topic, the argument of the book is not confined to an immanent exegesis but applies the idea of the past character of art to the exploration and development of themes that are only indirectly related, or not related at all, to Hegel's philosophy. Conversely, these non-Hegelian explorations will help enlighten what may look like a specific theme of Hegel's aesthetics, which however, as the book argues, sheds light on the core of his philosophy as a whole.

The encompassing character of the thesis is already emphasized by the variety of senses and purposes connected with it, which, for the sake of simplicity, can be grouped into three main dimensions. The first is the metaphysical-epistemological one: art, despite its progressive dematerialization from architecture through sculpture, painting, and music up to the almost-conceptual form of poetry, is, because of its structural materiality, no longer able to adequately embody and communicate the truth, that is, absolute or divine spiritual contents, which are by now the domain of philosophy. Secondly, there is a practical dimension: art is no longer an autonomous, adequate vehicle for the configuration, presentation, and communication of the highest religious, ethical, and political contents and values that constitute modern ethical life. Finally, there is the strictly aesthetic dimension: art has become the more and more fragmented and arbitrary product of the individual artist, thus relinquishing its aspiration to a universal meaning and relevance, while becoming a freer, secularized portrayal of the human world. Across its various dimensions, clearly, Hegel's thesis does not point to the end of the significance, or even less the existence, of art, but rather to the past character of its highest, universal, binding role.

Despite these introductory caveats, the idea of a past character of art might still sound bizarre. In order to lay the grounds for reclaiming it as a living philosophical asset of our time, we need to go back to its origins.

Historically, my overall claim is that Hegel's thesis is rooted in the modern, post-Kantian, and post-Revolutionary "project" (to use a Habermasian expression) of overcoming the unilateral rationalism of Enlightenment in order to preserve its core message and fulfil its promises. More precisely: in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and then in Schiller and in the early Idealism and Romanticism, art, beauty, and the aesthetic dimension as such began to play a pivotal role in showing the way to a notion of philosophy, and of "being human" in general, that was more holistic than the abstractly Enlightenment-inspired one and politically less extremist and more harmonious than the one in which the French Revolution ultimately collapsed. All of Hegel's philosophical journey begins from these coordinates. Even as early as his first unpublished notes and excerpts, his problem is how to actualize, both intensionally and extensionally, the supreme right of humans to knowledge and freedom, urgently announced by Kant and by the Revolution, but still lacking any widespread, steady accomplishment. For Hegel and his intellectual circle, the aesthetic dimension is at the very core of this problem, whether under the name of "beautiful religion" or "shared mythology" or "aesthetic education", and so forth. Now, while in Hegel's early writings art plays a central, paradigmatic role in addressing this issue, since the development of his mature system in Jena and especially in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he reverses this discourse into the idea of the irremediably past character of art's supreme function. Though he never employed the expression "end of art", in his lectures on aesthetics he is explicit that

art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past [*ein Vergangenes*]. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.

(A, 11)

This idea is not just empirically or historically grounded; actually, its sound, systematic groundwork lies in the paragraphs on art from the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. Here, in the very *summa* of Hegel's philosophical system, art is presented as the first, merely intuitive form of the absolute spirit, bound to become inadequate and be replaced in its highest role, first by revealed religion and finally by philosophy. In this way, Hegel pursues both a stark criticism of the contemporary Romantic claims of a primacy of art over philosophy as well as in the ethical-political realm, and an autonomous, multi-faceted philosophical aim. Such aim, it can be argued, is nothing less than the investigation and promotion of the conditions under which the freedom of the modern subject is concrete and effective, that is, the problem from which, as we saw, Hegel's philosophy

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as a whole took its cues. In order to get at the heart of Hegel's thesis, then, we need to linger some more on the theme of freedom.

Freedom is for Hegel the essence of spirit and the immanent driving force of history as well as of his philosophical system, which aims at conceptually understanding, and hence contributing to actualize, the configurations of the gradual liberation of the spirit and the human being. The centrality of freedom is, to be sure, no Hegelian peculiarity, yet in Hegel it takes on a peculiar radicalness because of the tight correspondence, and indeed co-implication, between the different forms of absolute spirit and the historical actualization of freedom in human institutions (objective spirit in its broadest sense). The philosophical form is the only fully adequate one for the actualization and development of freedom in the modern world, so that, if Hegel's philosophy is a "philosophy of freedom", the latter is both the subject and the object of philosophy. Philosophy is a product of freedom, and freedom is a product of philosophy. Philosophy is not just an external investigation of the shapes of the actualization of freedom: it makes those shapes possible. Hence the "absolute" character of Hegel's idealism, hence the unity of practical and theoretical reason, and hence also the equivalence of the rational and the actual. The latter, despite its somewhat blunt and aggressive wording, does not mean anything more than that freedom can only exist in the concreteness of specific empirical shapes, and that these shapes can only exist due to freedom. Without such concrete shapes, there would be no freedom and, without freedom, there would be no such shapes.

Thus, as opposed to Kant and Fichte (or to his view of them), Hegel conceives of human freedom concretely, that is, not as a universal principle transcending historical and empirical conditions, but as subjectivity concomitantly shaping itself and its objective environment. Actual freedom is always actualized as an empirical form; or, better said, it is always concrete (*konkret*, from the Latin *concrecere* meaning "to grow together") in an empirical form. Freedom, therefore, is always a concretion, a common growth of reason and empirical existence. According to Hegel, freedom finds its most adequate historical configuration in the modern world, as its institutions and configurations can be known, made sense of, and hence justified in a philosophical way, as thought is the only fully legitimate source of authority. The institutions characterizing the modern world, therefore, are not as such fully rational and "just", as many caricatured readings of Hegel, both favourable and hostile, would suggest. Yet, such institutions allow for a more developed and broader knowledge and practice of freedom than previous historical formations, as they are directly grounded on the acknowledgement of the supreme right of the freedom of the subject as such. In turn, this acknowledgement both necessitates and is necessitated by the primacy of the philosophical form over other forms of what Hegel

calls the “absolute spirit”. There is no freedom of the subject without the authority of the philosophical form, and vice versa.

Even in this rather deflated and mild version, Hegel’s views of freedom and the rationality of the modern world might sound like the speculations of a hyper-rationalistic mind, useless at best, suspicious at worst. Trying to remove this impression and reclaim Hegel for our time through what appears just as much as an outlandish speculation, namely the thesis of the past character of art, to which we can now return, might seem preposterous. Yet, a fundamental point that the investigation of the latter brings to light is that the bond between subjective freedom and philosophical form, however arguable, is not just a metaphysical aprioristic speculation, but a way to understand our own time and the shapes of freedom that characterize it. Other forms have previously played the role of philosophy, in other times. Art was the adequate form for understanding and expressing the highest contents in the classical Greek world, and so was revealed religion for the Christian world, through to the Reformation (or its philosophical and political outcomes: the Enlightenment and the French Revolution). These two forms are no longer fully adequate in our time, because they cannot be presented as universally binding, unlike discursive thought. Yet, nowhere does Hegel say or imply that art or religion is bound to disappear or lose all significance. Instead, they take up new, different configurations that need to be understood and made sense of philosophically, that is, under the conditions of the highest authority of the subject’s free thought. It is no coincidence that Hegel states that the science of art, that is, aesthetics, is more necessary to the modern world than it has ever been in the past (see *ÄH*, 6).

Dealing with “past” forms of absolute spirit, then, is not just an intellectual exercise, but an integral part of the effort to understand and consolidate, controversially if needed, the modern principle of the freedom of the subject, in the irreducible concreteness of its infinite shapes. The probing into the past character of art is a reflection on the genesis and implications of this principle, which marks, as Hegel explicitly states, the turning point towards modernity. Hegel also explicitly states that the corresponding transition from the spirit viewed as substance to the spirit viewed as subject, fully actualized in Christianity and in its philosophical self-understanding, is in essence accomplished in and through the Greeks’ “religion in the form of art” (*PhS*, 424). This points to a complex overall picture, in which one cannot juxtapose antiquity/modernity, unfreedom/freedom, and art/philosophy, but where discontinuities and continuities are to be unravelled and rearranged at all times. In this picture, the “rationality” of the actual does not imply a static, monolithic eternal present of the triumph of a disembodied philosophical idea, but just the opposite, namely the dialectical breakdown and refraction of rationality in the

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infinitely plural concrete shapes of the actualization of the subject's freedom. A further, obvious implication is that the work of philosophy can never be considered as finished, if philosophy is an essential practice that pursues the defence and development of freedom thus conceived. On the contrary, the philosophical work is always directed to the present, in the attempt to frame and answer questions which, in one way or another, have to do with this freedom. If the latter is rooted in the rationality and thinking capacity of the subject, which are never content with simply "positive" authorities and impositions, then the philosophical work of reconciliation with reality is an open-ended, infinite task, inviting not to acquiescence, as the word "reconciliation" might suggest, but to practising critique of both subjective and objective fallacies, of the shortcomings of the real world as well as those of the individuals inhabiting it.

To contribute to this task by consolidating the value and attractiveness of the thesis of the past character of art is the ambitious, but, as I hope to show, philologically and philosophically plausible overall intention of this book. If the arguments I am going to present in the following chapters are of any value, then it is really worth reclaiming the "present" (and presence) of art's past character, not only as a piece of the history of philosophy but also as a key to the understanding of our time. Thus, the following chapters, while touching upon different themes and aspects in an inevitably selective way, compose a unitary thread, leading all the way up from the inception of the thesis even before Hegel to a grunge rock album from the last decade of the past century. The chapters are arranged in a loose chronological order, pursuing the aforementioned overall systematic aims, first of all combining the reconstruction of the context of the genesis of Hegel's thesis (Chapter 1) with interpretations of the thesis in Hegel from the angles of religion (Chapter 2), right (Chapter 3), and aesthetics proper (Chapter 4). With Chapter 4 already dealing with some contemporary reappraisals of the thesis and Chapter 5 acting as a bridge between Hegel and our time on the issue of human rights, I then put the thesis to the test of time and critique, reinforcing the idea of its philosophical (Chapters 6–7) and artistic (Chapters 7–8) soundness. In the rest of this introduction, I will offer a more precise overview of the chapters.

Chapter 1, "Historical and Philosophical Background: Kant and Schiller, the Revolution, and the Malaise of Modernity", unfurls the thread by setting the origin of the thesis in the context of the extremely rich season of aesthetics that immediately followed the conclusion of Kant's critical system (1790) and the French Revolution (1789). In this context, the aesthetic reflection in general and art in particular take on a momentous shape and role. In authors such as Schiller or in the enigmatic fragment known as "the Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism" (written, or at least transcribed, by a young Hegel), the exploration and revivification of

the aesthetic dimension are the actual key to actualize both the premises of Kant's philosophy and the egalitarian, progressive claims of the French Revolution in a peaceful, harmonic, non-alienated way, thus overcoming what then began to be perceived as the malaise of modernity. While all of Hegel's philosophical journey is rooted in this context and explicitly acknowledges the epoch-making value of Kant's and Schiller's aesthetics, he progressively becomes sceptical about the centrality of art and its Romantic developments, thus laying the ground for the thesis.

Chapter 2, "From the Symbolic to the Humoristic and Back: The New Sacred of Art", turns to the thesis itself with a rather direct and traditional approach, based on a focused investigation of the succession of the three universal art forms (symbolic, classical, and romantic) on the backdrop of the relationship between art and religion. The goal is to trace, in and beyond Hegel's explicit wording, the various ways in which art is the central embodiment of the human relation with the sacred, from the enigmatic allusions of the symbolic, through the luminous presence of the classical, up to the withdrawal of the sacred from external matter in the romantic and, finally, to the rather "shocking" short-circuit contained in Hegel's suggestion of a return to the symbolic from the extreme drifts of romantic art, that is, what he calls the humoristic. As I will argue, in this short-circuit between art's extreme dissolution and its enigmatic origin, it is possible to outline the contour of a "new sacred" of art, which will constitute the architrave of my actualization attempt of the thesis of art's past character.

Chapter 3, "(The Absence of) Art's Right", pursues a more eccentric approach, reclaiming the topicality of the thesis by discussing its place in what might seem to be the most unlikely portion of Hegel's thought, namely his philosophy of right, where the issue of the role of art is marginal at best. This very reticence unlocks a well-defined image of the modern shape and role of art, as well as of the modern configuration of the relationship between the individual and the state. Art that is "past" in Hegel's sense has now at least the basic capacity of transmitting different options in terms of action and reflection in a non-binding and fictional, yet indirectly effective, way. Art is thus shown to play a paradigmatic part in the individual development and education (*Bildung*) in modern ethical-political life, based on its "formal" contribution to the securing and enrichment of the individual's particular experience, to the extent that the discussion of the place of art and of individual existence/action run parallel and can illuminate each other. Precisely because of its partial and past character, which motivates its absence from the philosophy of right, art (or at least certain artistic forms) can be interpreted as a time-adequate expression of individuality, demanding a careful reshaping of its "right" and politics, itself adequately reflected in Hegel's laconicism.

Chapter 4, “Futures of Art: Hegel, Danto, Pippin”, further refines and puts to the test the argument developed up to this point through a contrast with Danto’s and Pippin’s different and extremely influential interpretations of the thesis. In doing so, on the one hand, it better clarifies the specific contribution that Hegel can offer to the reflection on post-Hegelian art, and on the other, it criticizes Danto’s and Pippin’s readings for being, despite their many merits, insufficiently radical in framing such potential contribution in Hegelian terms. The chapter hence tries to go beyond Hegel with Hegelian resources, whereas – or so I claim – two of the most important progressive readings of the thesis do not use the whole Hegelian potential while dealing with post-Hegelian art, resulting instead in an impoverishment and stereotyping. The first, Hegel-immanent part of the chapter will set the tripartition of romantic art into the “religious circle”, the “mundane circle”, and the “formalism of subjectivity” against the paradigm of the classical and then try to go beyond the latter, characterizing the historical, not only artistic, figure of the formalism of subjectivity, before contrasting my reading with the interpretations by Danto and Pippin.

Chapter 5, “Antigone, the Disappearance of the Tragic, and Human Rights”, while still directly addressing Hegel’s aesthetics, builds a bridge with our times beyond aesthetics, by arguing that a specific thread of the thesis, namely the disappearance of the tragic, can help develop an attractive approach to the philosophy of human rights. This thread is pursued from Hegel’s famous reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone* to his idea of the right of the “world spirit” as absolute right. After clarifying Hegel’s concept of the tragic and of the fundamental ethical-political role of tragedy in classical Greek ethical life, the chapter shows how the latter is dissolved by the very action of tragedy. The worlds following such dissolution, that is, the Roman and the Christian-Germanic ones, are characterized by the absence of a tragic destiny, which, according to an expression Hegel borrows from Napoleon, is replaced by politics. In the prose of modernity, the return of the tragic as an irresistible clash of supposedly absolute, unilateral rights becomes a constantly looming possibility in the relationship between states. As I argue, Hegel’s idea of “world history as the world’s court of judgement”, mindful of Antigone’s destiny and of the prosaic conditions of modernity, can help develop an appropriate response to the return of tragic conflict in terms of a concrete, realistic approach to human rights.

Chapter 6, “Croce and Gramsci (and Gentile) on Hegel’s Dialectics and the Death of Art”, leaves the direct thematization of Hegel behind, in order to put the thesis to the test of time and show the resilience and attractiveness of its core tenets even when disengaged from Hegel himself. The chapter makes a comparison between Croce’s and Gramsci’s (and, though briefly, Gentile’s) views on Hegelian dialectics as structurally bound to their

views of the nature and role of art. I discuss Croce's peculiar Hegelianism, together with his head-on criticism of the thesis, considered Hegel's fatal error and directly leading Croce himself to the development of his own system of the "distincts" as a correction of Hegelian dialectics. I then contrast Croce's views on art with Gramsci's and, in the conclusion, also briefly with Gentile's, highlighting the radical, irreconcilable opposition of the three views of art, philosophy, Hegelian dialectics, and politics and in this way allowing the topicality of Hegel's thesis to emerge in all its seriousness and ramifications.

Chapter 7, "Subjects and Destinies of Poetry: Heidegger and Celan", turns to another philosopher proposing an influential autonomous reprisal of the thesis of art's past character (Heidegger), and to another author, this time a poet, not directly addressing the issue (nor Hegel's philosophy, for that matter) and yet acting as a powerful critical counterbalance to that reprisal (Celan). The reference to Hegel's thesis and Heidegger's explicit discussion of it clarifies Heidegger's attempt to give a supreme veritative role back to art and the "poetic antisubjectivism" this attempt entails. With the aim to criticize Heidegger's "destinal", and ultimately passivistic, reading of Hölderlin together with its ethical-political implications, the chapter turns to Celan, to show how his *Meridian* speech, while sharing the Heideggerian concern for the unrestrained dominion of technology and the modern, "aesthetic" treatment of art, formulates a forceful, persuasive rejection of Heidegger's poetic antisubjectivism. The conclusion focuses on Celan's poem *Todtnauberg*, depicting the 1967 "failed" encounter with Heidegger and draws some broader conclusions on the consequences of the authors' respective stances on poetry and (post-Shoah) subjectivity.

Chapter 8, "No Code Aesthetics", concludes the book addressing a topic that could hardly be further from Hegel, namely the album *No Code* by grunge rock band Pearl Jam (1996). My interpretation of Pearl Jam's album focuses on its apparent inconsistency and lack of organic unity, and on the general atmosphere of dissolution, contingency, and heterogeneity it is pervaded with. I read these features not as a sign of a temporary artistic loss on the side of the band, but, on the contrary, in terms of a paradoxical project, poised between the bold rejection of codes and the risk of this very rejection becoming a new code. In doing so, I establish a connection between the underlying intention of the album and Hegel's thesis, arguing that *No Code* can be read as an enlightening, concrete instance of the latter, and that, vice versa, using the thesis as an interpretive framework can have a therapeutic effect, which may help deal with the feeling of bewilderment the album can trigger. This finally leads to the outline of what I call a "no-code aesthetics", acting both as an upshot of this book and as an overture to future continuations.

1 Historical and Philosophical Background

Kant and Schiller, the Revolution, and the Malaise of Modernity

Hegel's idea of art's past character is rooted in the German philosophical debate across the last decade of the 18th century and the first years of the 19th century.¹ Two main events usher in such a short, yet decisive turn of time: the French Revolution (1789) and the completion of Kant's critical system through the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). It would not be inaccurate to say that Hegel's thesis is the outcome of such two events, mediated by a third factor, namely an incipient critical reflection on modernity. Such three factors, in the aforementioned context, all have to do with aesthetics. Indeed, if the second half of the 18th century is the pivotal junction in the history of aesthetics, the last decade of the century witnesses a veritable primacy of the discipline initiated or christened by Baumgarten in 1750.² In authors such as Schiller or in the enigmatic fragment known as "the Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism" (written, or at least transcribed, by a young Hegel), the exploration and revivification of the aesthetic dimension is the key to actualize both Kant's philosophical legacy and the egalitarian, progressive claims of the French Revolution in a peaceful, harmonic, non-alienated way, thus overcoming what then began to be perceived as the malaise of modernity. From 1790, the year Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* was published, to 1800, the year Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* was published, we move on from Kant's retraction of his own criticism to Baumgarten's very idea of a philosophical aesthetics (in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781) to Schelling's statement of the metaphysical and epistemological (and then also practical³) superiority of art over philosophy.

While all of Hegel's philosophical itinerary is rooted in this context and he explicitly acknowledges the epoch-making value of Kant's and Schiller's aesthetics, he progressively becomes sceptical about the centrality of art and its Romantic developments, thus laying the ground for the thesis of art's past character. From the early years of the 19th century onwards, in the long and complex path leading to Hegel's mature notion of the relations among art, philosophy, politics, religion, history, and so forth, art

and beauty are progressively voided of this revolutionary charge, and aesthetics of the responsibility of giving it a form. Here, I will not examine such development and the external influences it underwent point by point,⁴ but we will see how, starting from similar demands to those that underpinned the primacy of aesthetics, Hegel reached opposite conclusions, without (entirely) repudiating those demands. Hegel's thesis will therefore be set against the backdrop of that brief, yet striking season of the anthropological-philosophical-political primacy of aesthetics that was the last decade of the 18th century. I will outline the grounds for such primacy with reference to Kant (1) and Schiller (2), and then I will proceed to investigate the reasons and ways of its decline, as well as of its integration, in Hegel's philosophy (3).

A Kantian Opening

The starting point of this book is, then, Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.⁵ This work, as is well-known, has little to do with a philosophy of art, or even less with the claim of the primacy of art and beauty over philosophical reasoning. It presents itself, above all, as the keystone of Kant's critical philosophy, of which it represents, in the author's intentions, the point of completion and supreme unification. It is indeed, first and foremost, a grandiose philosophical endeavour to complete and unify the system of thought, bridging the gap between theory and praxis, sensibility and reason, nature and freedom.⁶ The overall problem of the third *Critique* is, with good approximation, to philosophically explain how the two domains of nature and freedom, of what appears to us but must not enter the determination of moral action and of what is only noumenal but must substantiate our praxis, can be joined together, without resorting to the loophole of introducing a third domain of objects. The system cannot be completed by establishing a further objective domain (as nature and freedom already cover the entire field of metaphysics), but by the ultimate clarification of how the human faculties (and hence the domains of nature and freedom) interact as such, regardless of any specific objective knowledge or interest. Such reconciliatory aim, then, is not just systematic but, we may say, anthropological (though transcendental), as it has to do with the possibility of an integral, harmonious use of human faculties, freely finding meanings that are determined neither by conceptual or moral laws, but are nonetheless universal, nor by private interests or inclinations, but are nonetheless subjectively based. It is, we may say, a wager that does not rest on objective data, but on the mere possibility of the wager itself.

This reconciliatory task is carried out by the power of judgement in its reflective use, expressing the need and the possibility, as much systematic as anthropological, to trace the universal in the particular. Only in this

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way is it possible not only to throw a bridge (systematic aspect) over the “incalculable gulf”,⁷ which separates nature from freedom, but also to cross it (anthropological and, indirectly, political aspect⁸). Such a need for mediation is the hallmark of the power of reflective judgement. The purest and most emblematic use of such ability is the aesthetic one: it is indeed in the judgement of taste that the free, harmonious, integral use of human faculties unfolds. This is because in it the individual breaks free from the constrictions imposed by private inclinations and interests, as well as by objective laws and goals, and lets the singularity of his own judgement speak with a universal voice. In this experience that does not deny any of the terms, neither nature nor freedom, neither subject nor object, neither the particular nor the universal, the individual has a radical experience of authenticity and integrity. He is alone with the enjoyment of the pure, free play of his faculties, of what constitutes him as a human being, and at the same time, this pure, free play paves the way to a free, meaningful communication with all other individuals. By listening to what constitutes me as a human being (the meeting of sensible and intellectual faculties), while suspending what makes me *this* human being only, I feel that I can aspire to a universal consensus which besides is not imposed from above, but is the immediate counterpart to and source of my feeling.

Although “embarrassing”⁹ and difficult to establish, aesthetic judgement is an ability that proves to be a powerful and universally accessible means of mediation and reconciliation. It emblematically embodies the possibility of communication between nature and freedom and opens the door between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. It is, then, the true core of the answer to what Kant sought in his third *Critique*. This is the case because, as Kant remarks, “beauty is valid only for human beings, i.e., animal but also rational beings, but not merely as the latter (e.g., spirits), rather as beings who are at the same time animal”.¹⁰ That is, there is an exclusive link between beauty and humanity, because beauty arises from that peculiar and difficult conjugation of the sensible and the rational of which only the human being is made. This is why beauty is a radical experience of the human being in its entirety: in the aesthetic experience, each individual is simply but integrally human, without any other adjective, without any other qualification, and therefore without any limitations. In this way, the power of aesthetic judgement breaks down the walls between the private individual and all fellow humans, thus establishing a relationship of intersubjectivity in which no term is weighed down by mere sensible inclinations or constrained by necessary universal laws, thus achieving an oxymoronic but peculiarly significant “subjective universality”.¹¹

The finding of philosophical principles of beauty (something that, at least in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had ruled out) is of crucial importance, not only for the feat of completing and organically

unifying the system of thought but also for understanding the possibility of the integrity of the individual subject: the unity of the system is also the unity of the human being. This point constitutes an extraordinarily fertile ground for post-Kantian reiterations as well as for post-Revolutionary ones. Indeed, as we will see in the next section, the development of Kant's philosophy and that of the Revolutionary motives largely follow the same path, which is the one laid out by the third *Critique*. The problem of finding or building new universals once the "old" ones are gone, and of doing so not through the top-down imposition of new ones, but with a bottom-up approach, through the active, disinterested, free reflection of potentially each subject, that is, the problem of the third *Critique*, is at the same time an anthropological-political and an aesthetic-philosophical one. Indeed, the direction therein opened is that of the overcoming of all dualisms.

Schiller and the Triumph of Art and Beauty

Such direction is followed, in his own way, by Schiller, an artist and philosopher and, unsurprisingly, an avid reader of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, as were almost all early idealists and Romantics, in short, the entire generation of intellectuals immediately following Kant. Much of Schiller's thinking (in fact even before his confrontation with Kant¹²) revolves around the problem of the reunification of the "modern" rift between the sensible and the rational nature. In his philosophical masterwork, "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man" (1795), such reflection rises to the rank of an ambitious, encompassing programme of spiritual, philosophical, anthropological, and political renewal of humanity as a whole. Written in the wake of the enthusiasm and then the gradual distancing of German intellectuals from the French Revolution and its epilogue of Terror, the *Letters* pursue the need for a social and political revolution in human relationships, though not the violent, abstractly impulsive path taken by the Revolution. Such reflection on the reasons and limits of the Revolution, and more in general on the spirit and needs of the "new" time as partly expressed in it, leads Schiller and others to question modernity not only as an age of rationality, emancipation, and progress but also as one of dramatic break with the past, fragmentation, alienation, and loss.¹³

Schiller's basic idea is that a political and social revolution cannot produce any truly beneficial and lasting effects unless it first addresses cultural and even sentimental aspects along with material ones. Political relations can only be changed for the better based on an "education" of individuals and their mutual relations. Such education, though, cannot be directly taken care of by the State,¹⁴ which is the main object of demands for change. The political State finds itself in an aporia: its current physical existence cannot even temporarily be halted, but in this way, one cannot expect the moral

idea, albeit so well-founded and justified by Kant's practical philosophy, to have any effect on it. In short, "when the craftsman has a timepiece to repair, he can let its wheels run down; but the living clockwork of the State must be repaired while it is still striking, and it is a question of changing the revolving wheel while it still revolves".¹⁵ Modernity is entangled in a double vicious circle, which is as much philosophical as it is political:

Intellectual education has to bring about moral education, and yet moral education is to be the condition of intellectual education? All improvement in the political sphere is to proceed from the ennobling of character – but how under the influence of a barbarous constitution is character ever to become ennobled?¹⁶

To get out of such a vicious circle, a third term must be found, which can be identified in beautiful art: "This instrument is fine art; such living springs are opened up in its immortal exemplars".¹⁷ As one can see, here, Schiller, while prompted by typically Kantian notions and conceptual networks, decidedly goes off the critical track when he objectifies that point of mediation that for Kant had to be "only" a harmonious disposition of mind in the subject, that is, the free play of his faculties.¹⁸ Schiller is directly confronted with a problem of a broadly political nature, which leads him to an objective (social, cultural, political) application of Kant's transcendental principles. To be sure, what happens in the course of the argument in the *Letters* is much more than an objective application of some pre-established principles. In fact, what in Kant could be defined as the systematic and anthropological centrality of beauty is transformed in Schiller into an actual philosophical and political primacy. This instantly comes to the fore in the way in which he, while outlining the space into which beautiful art is to be wedged as the keystone, does so by endowing it with attributes that would make any other solution unworkable. He already presupposes what only rhetorically appears to be a strenuously sought solution, precisely by offering a picture of the starting situation that in that solution, and only in it, finds its *raison d'être*. Consider: "A support must be looked for that will ensure the continuance of society, and make it independent of the natural state that is to be abolished".¹⁹ The starting situation is described by resorting to an objectified, and not merely transcendental, dualism, which can only be reconciled in the aesthetic experience, conceived of in Kantian terms:

This support is not to be found in the natural character of man that, selfish and violent as it is, aims at the destruction of society rather than at its preservation. Neither is it to be found in his moral character that has, *ex hypothesi*, first to be fashioned, and upon which, just because it

is free, and *because it never becomes manifest*, the lawgiver could never exert influence, nor with any certainty depend.²⁰

This already points to the impossibility of finding an immanent solution to the political and social problems of modernity, which violently burst in with the Revolution. Schiller remains true to the idea of a revolution, but then tries to point to ways through which it can be peaceful, harmonious, and above all lasting. The “support” sought by Schiller is, therefore, not something immanent in the functioning of modern society and State, because it is precisely that functioning that must be overthrown. Hence, the whole concern lies in how to objectively and not just transcendently mediate between the natural and the moral character, and to bring “into being a third character”²¹ which, at this point, can only be the aesthetic one. No real foundation or principle of modern society is concretely investigated, because it is assumed that there is no such foundation or principle and we consequently need to move on and look for another, modernity-transcending foundation on which to re-establish not only the reflection on modernity but also modernity itself, from a social and political point of view. But such “third character”, which from the outset is certainly an intermediate and mediating one, cannot then but turn out to be isolated and detached from reality, precisely because the actual foundations of that reality have not been questioned, as the third character is there to bypass them. The support sought and then found by Schiller is bound to remain pure but ineffective with respect to reality or to be incorporated into and subjected to the laws of that reality which keeps on going its material way undisturbed, necessarily swallowing up the aesthetic character that should instead revolutionize it. By not concretely confronting modernity as a philosophical issue, Schiller unintentionally ends up proposing a “support” that is pre-modern both in form (because it is found in a transcendent way and is not immanent in modernity) and in content (because it is inspired by a past model, or even one that never existed except in a process of idealization: the Greek polis). Or, maybe more precisely, while looking for the conditions of a truly accomplished, reconciled modernity, Schiller bypasses the current features and conditions of a modernity seen as the pure negation of an aesthetic political ideal, which thus turns out to be pre-modern and ultimately ineffective. As we shall see, two main roads branch off from there, the Romantic and the Hegelian one, in which the crossroads of the aesthetic ideal in modernity becomes evident: a triumph of genius and artistic subjectivity, but in fact separated from the world, or an assimilation into a political and social structure that no longer recognizes that ideal as having any leading role, but only a secondary one.

Such swing is already visible in Schiller. In art and beauty, his project finds the “support” for a renewal of thought and humanity, and precisely

because of their intermediary and mediating role between reason and sensibility, freedom and nature, the State and the individual, and so on. But such project of aesthetic education of humankind then leads to a decisive axial shift: from being an intermediate term (and insofar as it is an intermediate term) beauty ends up claiming objective primacy over nature and freedom. Thus, the main dilemma in Schiller's project is the one between beauty as the necessary intermediate means to be crossed and then overcome along the way to progress and renewal, and beauty as the ultimate and supreme horizon in which all human activity should find a place. Inspired by the still-Kantian thesis according to which in the aesthetic experience the human being enjoys a free, playful relationship with all his potential as a human being, Schiller is faced with an alternative that he left unsolved and, in fact, did not even thematize as an issue. Beauty is at the same time the pinnacle of humanity and the irremediably transient moment in which the subject authentically discovers himself and freely communicates with his fellow human beings, but without objective repercussions. Even from a purely transcendental point of view, such shift is quite obvious:

If, then, in one respect the aesthetic mode of the psyche is to be regarded as *naught* – once, that is, we have an eye to particular and definite effects – it is in another respect to be looked upon as a state of *supreme reality*, once we have due regard to the absence of all limitation and to the sum total of the powers that are conjointly active within it.²²

It is, of course, a kind of productive shift, in the sense that it highlights a boundless range of possibilities from which one can start again in an attempt to mend the rifts of modern society and address its malaise. After all, what Schiller is interested in, more than developing a philosophical discourse that is always straightforward, is precisely outlining a project designed to reinstate the wholeness and authenticity of the individual, to be then expanded into the harmonious renewal of humanity as a whole. Obviously, from this point of view, the question of the real position of beauty in a scale of values seems to concern more a hypothetical future time in which aesthetic education has already produced its effects rather than the present time from which the need for aesthetic education stems. Artistic beauty becomes an ultimate horizon, and Schiller can then take up the Kantian thesis of the exclusive link between humanity and beauty as well as the Kantian notion of “free play”,²³ radicalizing them into two premises from which we can easily deduce how the Kantian argument is no longer taken to Kantian consequences. Schiller writes: “With beauty man shall *only play*, and it is *with beauty only* that he shall play”²⁴ and “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays*”.²⁵ What we can infer from

that, though not explicitly expressed by Schiller, is that “man is entirely human only when he plays with beauty”.²⁶ While Kant stated that beauty is only valid for humans, here Schiller performs a significant reversal, by adding that only beauty must be valid for a human that aspires to be wholly human. It is only through beauty that the lost wholeness and harmony of the subject can be recovered and thereby also affect the functioning of the State, by preventing it from exacerbating the alienation, fragmentation, oppression, that is, in general, the malaise of modernity.

Schiller notes that his is not a utopian project, as he recalls that the ideal of a harmonious and integral subject and society was once a reality. The reference is of course to Winckelmann’s idealized ancient Greece, to that world in which sensibility and reason lived together in aesthetic unity in each individual, and each individual lived in aesthetic unity with the State, gods were human and humans divine, and so forth.²⁷ The reference to classical Greece constitutes the yardstick by which to measure the malaise of the modern world and confirm the effectiveness of the aesthetic education project. It is, at least as Schiller presents it, the objective, historically given evidence of the claim that the human being is truly and fully human only when he plays with beauty. Yet, idealizations aside, once again this argument does not elude ambiguity. Both the individual and humankind pass, in a specific order, through three states in which the transition from mere naturalness to spirituality is accomplished: “Man in his *physical* state merely suffers the dominion of nature; he emancipates himself from this dominion in the *aesthetic* state, and he acquires mastery over it in the *moral*”.²⁸ In these three states, which could well constitute the backbone of both an anthropology and a philosophy of history, the relationship between the second state and the third state is not so clear, in the light of the previous articulation of the discourse. That is, if the moral or rational state provides a complete mastery over nature, is there still room, in it, for that authentic experience of humanity that is the aesthetic experience? And from a historical point of view, if the aesthetic stage is that of classical Greece and the moral stage risks turning into the revolutionary dystopia of a hyper-rational, alienated bourgeois State and its universal laws, is it really possible to envisage, if not a reversal, at least an integration such that the former stage can be a model for the latter? Finally, should we favour a concept of freedom in the Kantian sense (which Schiller never recants) or that of an “aesthetic freedom”?²⁹

Take, for example, the following statement:

In the midst of the fearful kingdom of forces, and in the midst of the sacred kingdom of laws, the aesthetic impulse to form is at work, unnoticed, on the building of a third joyous kingdom of play and of semblance, in which man is relieved of the shackles of circumstance, and

released from all that might be called constraint, alike in the physical and in the moral sphere.³⁰

Here, we cannot fail to see how the intermediate stage seems to aspire to a supreme position; yet, Schiller does not adjudicate on such aspiration, indeed he does not even thematize it. In the conclusion of the *Letters*, it is Schiller himself who seems to bend the enthusiasm of the first letters into a resigned and vaguely aristocratic utopianism:

Here, therefore, in the realm of aesthetic semblance, we find that ideal of equality fulfilled that the enthusiast would fain seen realized in substance . . . But does such a state of aesthetic semblance really exist? And if so, where is it to be found? As a need, it exists in every finely attuned soul; as a realized fact, we are likely to find it, like the pure church and the pure republic, only in some few chosen circles.³¹

Last but not least, one should not forget that Schiller's own artistic production (most notably the dramas *Wallenstein* and *The Robbers*) demonstrates the tragic fallacy of the hope for the restoration of the aesthetic ideal much more than its concrete feasibility.³²

Hegel's Deflation and Modernity as a Philosophical Problem

Two main roads depart from Schiller's idea of aesthetic education, which, each pursuing only some of the directions laboriously cohabiting in that ingenious but not always rigorous project, eventually no longer meet and reach mutually incompatible destinations. Simplifying a little, these are the two paths taken by the Romantics and by Hegel, respectively. For some time (roughly up to Hegel's first Jena phase), they somehow manage to go together: just think of the so-called *Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism*, the outcome of the joint cooperation of thinkers who eventually went in contrasting directions.³³ After such an extreme attempt at syncretism, those paths finally diverge.³⁴ The road taken by the early Romantics (the Schlegel brothers and Schelling, most notably) is that of maintaining the primacy of beauty and above all of art, at the expense, in time, of the typically Kantian-Enlightenment requirement of rationality that Schiller had not abjured. Hegel's path, on the other hand, is the one that leads to the philosophical foundation of the primacy of philosophy itself and of a rationally founded and justified ethical-political reality, while renouncing the primacy of art and beauty. The aesthetics of Kant, Schiller, and the *Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism* cannot be qualified (only) as philosophical reflections on beauty or art, as they claimed to play a much less specialized and more decisive role. They ultimately aimed to

show the possibility of the unity of the system of thought and the wholeness of the human being (Kant), the way forward to a radical, yet peaceful and lasting renewal (Schiller), the very destiny of philosophy, of all human knowledge and activity, as well as of history, religion, and political organizations (*Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism*).

For Hegel, aesthetics is instead “only” philosophy of art. However, this does not mean that he rejects the encompassing goals just listed, which were a response to the newly felt malaise of modernity, along with the primacy of the aesthetic sphere, which was called upon to interpret them. In Hegel, indeed, the need for a system of thought that is organic and unified, for a worldview responding to the demands and problems of modernity, for an understanding of the individual that is not split between being and having to be (or nature and freedom), and for the foundation of a community and a political power that is rational but neither oppressive to the individual nor abstract with respect to particularity is strongly felt. Hegel fully takes on the demands that had inspired Kant’s third *Critique* and Schiller’s project, which he greatly appreciates for having shown (though failing to reach a rigorous speculative foundation and conclusion) how unity is not something that simply must be, but something that at every moment, in different degrees, is already there (see *ÄK*, 18–19).³⁵ From a systematic point of view, the Hegelian move is that of a unitary encyclopaedic system of philosophy, in which the passages are not intellectually imposed from the outside, but are concrete immanent movements of thought itself and its categories within an idealistic framework.³⁶ Yet we may wonder, where are those demands that the encyclopaedic system itself has removed from the aesthetic sphere once and for all projected into? By contrast, the juxtaposition with the Romantics’ path (at least in Hegel’s reading) is revealing. The more they emphasize the need to find reconciliation in the work of art, in its creation, and in the metaphysical spaces it opens up, the more we must be led to explore, in Hegel’s philosophy as a whole, the possibility of a solution that is immanent in the system and in the attributes of the modern world that only the “owl of Minerva” of philosophy has the authority to recognize as effective.

Here, immanence means that the contradictions of modernity must be addressed on their own ground, not with a conceptual paraphernalia consisting partly of Kantian ideas and partly of Greek sculptures and tragedies. And, politically speaking, the essential ingredient of modernity is the presence of civil society, as a sphere theoretically distinct from the State. Civil society is the realm of individual interest and “utility”, “the great idol of our age”³⁷ to whose domination Schiller traces back, essentially, the evils of modernity. Hegel, though critical of unregulated liberalism and the atomization of society, in no way sets out to simply remove or deny such domination, but is rather concerned first of all about scientifically

understanding its place and the needs to which it responds.³⁸ He aims at clarifying its philosophical background (the principle of subjective freedom, as we shall see) and integrating it into a more general and complex view, which does not tend to remove it but to concretely understand it so as to be able to counterbalance it as far as possible, and also to see its advantages over a largely idealized antiquity.³⁹ It is within this sphere, in its very functioning, that the mechanism of conciliation must be sought, and not, as Schiller wanted, in a separate and neutral element such as art, which aims to remove the very existence of that sphere through the aesthetic education of the individual.

The distance that now separates Hegel from Schiller's project can be measured in the characteristics, respectively, attributed to the formal process that leads the individual to overcome mere naturalness and egoistic interest and approach ethical and rational universality. As we saw, Schiller postulates the necessary independence and otherness of the "support" sought with respect to the forces that pervade modernity. For Hegel, on the other hand, this is a process immanent in the moment of civil society, in which

the interest of the Idea – an interest of which these members of civil society are as such unconscious – lies in the process whereby their individuality and their natural condition are raised, both by the necessities of nature and by the arbitrariness of their needs, to formal freedom and the formal universality of knowing and willing – the process whereby subjectivity in its particularity is *educated* [bilden].

(PhR, 184)⁴⁰

In other words, Hegel does not work on the extremes of a philosophically constructed dualism, but focuses his analysis on a mechanism that is already always in action, with respect to which the project of a structural revolution, prompted by a model linked back to an old, supposedly ideal historical time, cannot but turn out to be unrealistic and nostalgic. The growth, the social and political *Bildung*, of the individual does not take place on a heterogeneous basis with respect to the dynamics of modernity, but is *Bildung* through and for those very dynamics. This is a difference in the approach or method even more than in content, but, in my opinion, it shows the huge distance that separates the Schillerian project, still in all respects an offspring of the 18th century, and Hegel's philosophy, in which modernity is concretely brought to the fore as an actual philosophical problem.⁴¹ It is precisely such methodological difference that illustrates the fundamental difficulty of Schiller's project, resulting in the shifts we saw earlier. Schiller chooses the (Kantian) path of transcendental deduction to ground his thesis of the primacy of art and the necessity

of aesthetic education as a way out of the crisis of modernity. In other words, he chooses a transcendental path for a goal that is not transcendental, because it does not refer to the conditions in which knowledge or action is possible as such, but points to a universal and objective concept of humanity (a Platonic idea, if you will) which is associated with beauty – a beauty, however, that should not be just a transcendental principle, but the standard bearer of a revolution. Such argumentative strategy is entirely self-conscious, stemming in fact from the observation that “*experience* is not the judgement seat before which such an issue as this can be decided”.⁴² Schiller is in search of the “pure *rational concept* of beauty”,⁴³ but this search, inspired by the conviction that “beauty would have to be shown to be a necessary condition of human being”,⁴⁴ inevitably leads to the necessity to “lift our thought to the pure concept of human nature”.⁴⁵

The root of every aporia is here: such a pure concept of humanity is a philosophical construction that – intentionally – does not account for any historical-empirical conditions and, as such, remains ineffective just when one must necessarily go back to them. In fact, even further upstream, it is precisely the search for a pure concept of humanity that lays bare the abstract, dualistic character of Schiller’s project and its distance from Hegel’s approach. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* will powerfully show the inconsistency and abstractness of such a concept: it will show that there is no pure concept of humanity, and the forms of the human are always the result of historical processes of self-construction and self-consciousness.⁴⁶ There is no a priori human nature: it only exists in the construction of specific historical forms identified by the acknowledgement or authoritativeness of different normative principles (broadly, the objective spirit), expressed and known in turn through specific spiritual and cultural practices (broadly, the absolute spirit). An effective, concrete confrontation with the malaise of modernity cannot take place by resorting to an abstract, a priori human nature that is supposed to coincide with, or be based on, a rational concept of beauty; it can only take place with reference to the historically concrete and empirically conditioned fact(s) of the ethical, political, religious, social, and economic forms of modernity. In this way, Hegel overcomes the dimension of the ought-to-be, hypostatized by Schiller when speaking of aesthetic education as the only possible remedy for the malaise of modernity.

The Hegelian view of modernity does not remove the selfish and violent immediacy of the “useful” and the “particular”, but takes it as its cue to show how a mediation is, in fact, already always at work in ethical life. It is no longer a matter of philosophically looking for transcendent support or a remedy for the malaise of modernity, it is a matter of making civil society in particular and modernity itself in general a philosophical topic, in which the mediation between the universal and the particular and the

interpenetration of the rational and the real are seen as already present, and yet must be philosophically known, explained, and actualized. In this, it is clear that the more civil society takes its own place, both as a philosophical theme and as a sphere of politics, the more art, mythology, and so forth, must step aside, or rather, find their own accommodation within and conditional to civil society and the encyclopaedic system of philosophy. Neither politically nor philosophically, as we will see, are art and aesthetics condemned to irrelevance for Hegel, as the – non-Hegelian – expression “end of art” might suggest. Politically speaking, art continues to play a *Bildung* role, a role of growth, education, and memory that is relevant and, in some respects, paradigmatic, precisely because of the past and partial character of art as a form of the absolute spirit. Therefore, it would not be entirely incorrect to speak, even in Hegel, of the possibility of an aesthetic education, a possibility that, however, is given on the basis not of the primacy, but precisely of the past and partial character of art. From a philosophical perspective, art becomes the object of scientific reflection and knowledge (i.e. aesthetics, conceived by Hegel as the philosophy of art). It is no longer a self-sufficient and absolute form, but it refers to the higher level of philosophical reflection. The next three chapters are devoted to explicating such “past”/“new” place of art from different angles, without forgetting the background in which Hegel’s thesis is rooted.

Notes

- 1 For a first overview of the thesis of art’s past character, see Siani 2018b. I will mostly use the term “art’s past character”, though depending on the context sometimes, I will also use “end of art” or equivalent terms, or just speak of “the thesis” for brevity.
- 2 On the complicated history of aesthetics in and right after its Baumgartenian origins, see Amoroso 2008; Nuzzo 2006, 293–295; Guyer 2020.
- 3 For example, in Schelling’s *Über Dante in philosophischer Beziehung* (1803).
- 4 See, among others, Siani 2021.
- 5 It should be clear that here this work will only be considered from the perspective of my topic, which is Hegel’s thesis of art’s past character. An adequate discussion of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* would require a substantially different approach, as well as way more space. In my overall reading, I broadly rely, among others, on Amoroso 1984; for a more adequate presentation of my Hegel-oriented interpretation of this work, of which this paragraph can only present a basic outline, see Siani 2015b. A similar caution also applies to the discussion of Schiller in the next paragraph.
- 6 This is already apparent in the two introductions to the work.
- 7 Kant 2002, 63.
- 8 The main reference in this regard is of course Arendt 1982.
- 9 “This embarrassment about a principle (whether it be subjective or objective) is found chiefly in those judgments that are called aesthetic, which concern the beautiful and the sublime in nature or in art” (Kant 2002, 57).
- 10 Kant 2002, 95.

- 11 Kant 2002, 97.
- 12 The reference is to Schiller's two medical dissertations, *Philosophie der Physiologie* (1779) and *Versuch über den Zusammenhang der tierischen Natur des Menschen mit seiner geistigen* (1780).
- 13 In this regard, the fundamental text remains Habermas 1987 (on Schiller in particular see 45–50). See also Pippin 1999; Pinna, Montani, Ardovino 2006.
- 14 In this chapter, I use “State” with the capital letter to signalize the political meaning of the term (translating the German *Staat*) as distinguished from “state” as “condition” (translating the German *Zustand*), a technical term in Schiller.
- 15 Schiller 1993, 92.
- 16 Schiller 1993, 107–108.
- 17 Schiller 1993, 108.
- 18 More generally, Schiller reads the third *Critique* essentially as a theory of beauty, while for Kant the more properly aesthetic interest is conditional on the broader issue of the power of judgement. Schiller's “misunderstanding” evidently plays a key role in the history of the effects and reception of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.
- 19 Schiller 1993, 92.
- 20 Schiller 1993, 92.
- 21 Schiller 1993, 92.
- 22 Schiller 1993, 148.
- 23 Kant 2002, 102.
- 24 Schiller 1993, 131.
- 25 Schiller 1993, 131.
- 26 The notions of “human”, “beauty”, and “play” are mutually convertible: see Amoroso 2011, 202.
- 27 For this demonstration of the possibility of the ideal based on its (supposedly) historical reality, see the sixth letter.
- 28 Schiller 1993, 156.
- 29 Exemplarily, see the twentieth letter and its long concluding footnote, in which this expression appears (Schiller 1993, 146).
- 30 Schiller 1993, 176.
- 31 Schiller 1993, 178.
- 32 See also the observation, in poetic form, of the harrowing effect of modern (as opposed to ancient) tragedy in Schiller's *Xenia* 325 and 326, and Hegel's fragment of an early essay on Schiller's *Wallenstein* (1800–01), which ends precisely by going back to those lines.
- 33 This is a quite enigmatic short fragment, first published by Franz Rosenzweig in 1917, materially written or transcribed by Hegel around 1796–97. Its authorship is still controversial, with scholars pointing, apart from Hegel, to Schelling, Hölderlin or even a fourth author. It has a Schillerian inspiration with a more radical tune, aiming to combine the necessity of a consequent full development of the Kantian premises with that of a social, political, religious revolution, even leaning towards anarchism, into the paradoxical idea of a “mythology of reason” and of a supreme role of beauty and poetry: “The supreme act of reason, with which it encompasses all ideas, is an aesthetic act and . . . *truth and goodness* are united like sisters only in beauty” (ÄSP). See, among others, Hansen 1989; Siani 2010a.
- 34 This is, of course, just a simplified reconstruction that does not go into the historical-philosophical details but aims at neatly presenting Hegel's systematic reasons for postulating art's past character. As a matter of fact, the juxtaposition

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- between Hegel and the Romantics is way more nuanced: see, among others, Pöggeler 1998; Gardner 2018.
- 35 See also Ameriks 2002.
- 36 Moland 2019 presents an excellent case for the necessity to rigorously frame Hegel's philosophy of art within the general context of his idealistic understanding of philosophy, so that the two can shed light on each other and gain (a much neglected) plausibility.
- 37 Schiller 1993, 89.
- 38 Here belongs Hegel's interest in a typically modern science: political economy. As to it, his disenchanted tones surprisingly recall Kant's expressions about beauty and aesthetic judgement: political economy is "one of the sciences which have arisen out of the conditions of the modern world. Its development affords the interesting spectacle (as in Smith, Say, and Ricardo) of thought working upon the endless mass of details which confront it at the outset and extracting therefrom the simple principles of the thing, the understanding *effective* in the thing and directing it. It is to find reconciliation here to discover in the sphere of needs this appearance [*Scheinen*] of rationality lying in the thing and effective there; but if we look at it from the opposite point of view, this is the field in which the understanding with its subjective aims and moral opinions vents its discontent and moral frustration" (PhR, 187). Here, one would have to discuss the fundamental role played in the Hegelian paradigm shift by his reading and reflecting on English economists, especially in his Frankfurt and Jena years: see, among others, Riedel 1984; Pöggeler 1974. I have argued that ideas and arguments peculiar to Kantian and Schillerian aesthetics later flowed into the Hegelian theory of civil society: see the last chapter of Siani 2010b.
- 39 Let it not be forgotten, Hegel has no illusions about the political – let alone philosophical – possibility of completely eliminating the negative and destabilizing effects of the sphere of egoism, so much so that the problem of the ever-widening creation of a derelict, irreconcilable "rabble", and of poverty in general, is analysed, but left factually unsolved in his *Philosophy of Right* (see PhR, 221).
- 40 I will return to the fundamental issue of *Bildung* or education (though the English translation is quite reductive here) and the role art can play in it, in Chapter 3 of this book.
- 41 See the second chapter of Habermas 1987, on "Hegel's Concept of Modernity", Siep 2011; Pippin 1999, 11; Siani 2010b.
- 42 Schiller 1993, 114.
- 43 Schiller 1993, 114.
- 44 Schiller 1993, 115.
- 45 Schiller 1993, 115.
- 46 See, among others, Pinkard 1996; Houlgate 2005, 13–18.

2 From the Symbolic to the Humoristic and Back The New Sacred of Art

After presenting the background to the thesis of art's past character, we can now turn to the thesis itself. Several different entry points might be chosen here. The next chapters will explore some rather eccentric, or at least unusual, perspectives: in this one, however, I try to pursue a direct and traditional approach, based on a focused investigation of the succession of the three universal art forms (the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic) on the backdrop of the relationship between art and religion. The guiding thread will be the attempt to trace, in and beyond Hegel's explicit wording, the various ways in which art is the central embodiment of the human relation with the sacred, from the enigmatic allusions in the symbolic through the luminous presence of the classical up to the withdrawal of the sacred from external matter in the romantic and, finally, the rather "shocking" short-circuit of Hegel's suggestion of a return to the symbolic from the extreme drifts of romantic art, that is, what he calls the humoristic. As I will argue, in this short-circuit between the extreme dissolution and the enigmatic origin of art, one can trace the outline of a "new sacred" of art, which will constitute the architrave of my attempt at actualizing the thesis of art's past character. After some introductory remarks on the deep-going and pervasive nature of the connection between the thesis of art's past character and Hegel's view of religion and modernity (1), the chapter will go through the tripartition of the forms of art (2) and discuss the final moments of art (3), while outlining, with an actualizing intent, a space for a new sacred of art (4).

At the Beginnings of the End of Art

A discussion of art's past character in Hegel necessarily requires some consideration of religion.¹ The theme of religion, with its cultural, political, and social effects and its ability to reflect the spirit of the time, has been at the core of Hegel's philosophy since his early writings, as we saw in the first chapter. From a historical perspective, it is the breakthrough and

consolidation of Christianity, with its principle of subjective freedom, that marks a watershed between antiquity and modernity for Hegel, as we will see in the next chapter. The very transition from antiquity to modernity, leading to the problematization of the latter, takes the form, first and foremost, of the decline of the pagan, polytheistic, artistic religion, and the spreading of the Christian, monotheistic, revealed religion. Having overcome the polemical undertone of his early writings and placed the historical question in the broader dialectical frame of his philosophy, Hegel understands this passage not as a regression, but as a spiritual necessity and a fundamental and unavoidable stage in the progress of freedom.² The picture, however, is more complicated than a mere account of the progress from antiquity to modernity, from pagan religion to Christianity, and from art to philosophy.³ The main element of complication, and the starting point of this chapter, is the fact that, while the right of subjective freedom was announced and universalized by Christianity, it was prepared by or even born out of the “religion in the form of art” (*Kunstreligion*)⁴ of ancient Greece. With reference to it, Hegel speaks, in the *Phenomenology*, of “the night in which substance was betrayed and made itself into Subject” (PhS, 426). Out of metaphor, “through the religion of Art, Spirit has advanced from the form of *Substance* to assume that of *Subject*” (PhS, 453).⁵ It is in this religion that is art (or art that is religion) that the spirit first achieves self-awareness, albeit still in an inadequate form: this is one of the reasons why, in Hegel’s later system, art is the first form of absolute spirit.⁶ How can religion in the form of art be the point of transition from spirit as substance to spirit as subject?

First of all,

[I]f we ask, which is the *actual* Spirit which has the consciousness of its absolute essence in the religion of art, we find that it is the *ethical* or the *true* Spirit. This is not merely the universal substance of all individuals; on the contrary, since this substance has for *actual* consciousness the shape of consciousness and it is individualized, it follows that the substance is known by the individuals as their own essence and their own work.

(PhS, 424)

In the ethical spirit, that is, in Greek ethical life, the universal substance matches the consciousness of the individual, so that, although still limited by a lack of reflection, the individual feels free in that he immediately adheres to the universal. This “is the free people in which hallowed custom constitutes the substance of all, whose actuality and existence each and everyone knows to be his own will and deed” (PhS, 425, transl. modified). As we can see, the same immediate nexus between art, religion, and political

community that underrun Hegel's earlier reflection is reconstructed here, though this time as something essentially limited. Religion in the form of art can in fact only belong to a community that lives by collective custom and not by individual reflection or self-consciousness. The individual subject does not yet, by himself, have absolute value or freedom. He only lives as part of the substance, as if suspended in it, without conflict (hence without "modern" alienation) but also without moral self-awareness. The Greek world is the world of the immediate and spontaneous unity of the form of spirit and the form of consciousness. The authority providing the individual with the norms for action is not the interiority of consciousness and reflection, but it is not the exteriority of a fully transcendent, alien, and omnipotent god either (as was the case, for Hegel, of the Jewish religion or, as we will see, of symbolic art).

The beautiful form of the work of art is the manifestation of the absolute spirit as appropriate to this world. Religion in the form of art is the expression of such situation, but at the same time, it "works" against it, because, unlike the previous moment of "natural religion", in which the divine presents itself precisely in the figure of natural elements (light, plants, and animals), in artistic religion, it is the conscious subjectivity of the artist that gives a sensible form to the divine. Here lies the root of the inevitable dissolution of this form of religion and of the community that is grounded on it: the divine figure is created, and thus totally pervaded, by the consciousness of the creating subject (not just the artist,⁷ but the whole ethical community). Gradually, in turning to his god, the individual member of the community will realize that in it, he finds nothing but himself: the very sensible configuration of the god, the work of human creativity, ends up giving rise to an undue mix of human and divine elements in religion, and thus paves the way to the transition to revealed religion. Thus,

the religion of the ethical Spirit is, however, its elevation above its real world, the withdrawal from its truth into the pure knowledge of itself. Since the ethical people lives in immediate unity with its substance and lacks the principle of the pure individuality of self-consciousness, the complete form of its religion first appears as *divorced* from its subsistence [*Bestehen*].

(PhS, 425, transl. modified)

Religion in the form of art works towards the destruction of its own world and of itself. The contradictory aesthetic mixture of human and divine elements in the work of art must eventually make way for the one spiritual god of revealed religion, and then for its philosophical conceptualization.⁸ This happens immanently in religion in the form of art through its three moments: the abstract work of art, the living work of art, and

the spiritual work of art. Religion in the form of art thus lives by a kind of paradox, having its own self-destruction as destiny and form of its accomplishment.

As announced earlier, the result is that

through the religion of Art, Spirit has advanced from the form of *Substance* to assume that of *Subject*, for *it produces* its . . . shape, thus making explicit in it the act, or the self-consciousness, that merely vanishes in the awful Substance, and does not apprehend its own self in its trust. (PhS, 453)

Religion in the form of art, corresponding to the configuration of spirit as substance, dictates the transition to the configuration of spirit as subject, thus enacting its own completion/end and the transition to revealed religion. Such dissolution is the dawn of modernity. This should not, however, be read in terms of an abstract juxtaposition between antiquity and modernity as two subsequent epochs in a progressive narration. On the contrary, antiquity works to generate the constitutive principle of modernity, namely subjectivity. Religion in the form of art not only predates but also gives rise to revealed religion through its own self-destruction. To use a catchy phrase, we could say that antiquity is the construction of modernity, of a modernity that however preserves within itself that construction as a living heritage, and because of this cannot but lend new spaces and roles to art itself. Already here we can notice the fundamental, structural, pervasive character of the thesis of art's past character in Hegel's philosophy. In order to pursue it beyond religion in the form of art, we need to take a step back to what comes before it.

Symbolic, Classical, Romantic: The Systematic Placement

Things immediately get difficult here, since in the *Phenomenology* the preceding moment is that of natural religion, whereas the heir to religion in the form of art in the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, namely classical art, is preceded by symbolic art. Such divergence is but an instance of the massive difference in context, development, and aim between the two works, and more in particular of the fact that, while in the *Phenomenology* (and in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia*, 1817), art is not yet independently treated but is part of religion, in the later two editions of the *Encyclopaedia* (1827, 1830), art gains full systematic independence as the first form of absolute spirit.⁹ Things are even further complicated by the fact that, in the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel defines the entire sphere of the absolute spirit as "religion", but then distinguishes a second specific moment within it as "revealed religion". Religion as such comes

before the artistic need (and indeed the first religious manifestations do not necessarily result in artistic configurations, as proven by the existence of natural religion), and yet, as revealed religion, it is also a more adequate manifestation of the divine than that made possible by art. Even if we focus on art in its systematic independence as the first moment of absolute spirit, as I shall do here, grasping the historical and conceptual succession of the three universal art forms (the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic)¹⁰ requires some reference to religion.

Keeping in mind this complexity, which we cannot even begin to unravel here, let us now move on to symbolic art. In it,

the figuration suitable to the Idea is not yet found; the thought, going forth and struggling with the shape, is displayed as a negative attitude towards it, while at the same time it endeavours to embody itself in the shape. The meaning, the content, thereby shows that it has not yet reached the infinite form, that it is not yet known as free spirit and not yet conscious of itself as free spirit. The content is only the abstract god of pure thinking or a striving towards him, a striving without rest or reconciliation which throws itself into shape after shape, since it cannot find its goal.

(E, 260–261)

Symbolic art belongs to a spiritual epoch not yet freed from the yoke of nature, in which therefore the spirit does not take possession of the sensible by informing it, but it is the formless multiplicity and sublime immensity of the works (essentially the architectural ones) that symbolically refer to the struggle that the divine goes through to manifest itself as determined content in an adequate form.

We do not need to and cannot go into more detail here, not least because the symbolic art form is probably the most problematic one from both a historical and a conceptual point of view, and as a matter of fact, its discussion is massively revised throughout Hegel's different courses on aesthetics.¹¹ Suffice it to say here that the symbolic art form is less perfect, more primitive than the classical one, because in it, the god or the spiritual content has not yet reached sufficient determination and is not known as free spirit. The divine does not yet have concreteness, but is only the abstract and incessant movement of the spirit which, unable to define itself as determined content, takes shape in all forms without ever finding the adequate one: it is in fact impossible for a content that is still indeterminate and constantly changing to find a form. Thought then goes beyond the figure, it struggles with it, because, in its magmatic pouring into a thousand forms, it cannot be satisfied with any of them. In a sort of compensatory struggle, spirit takes on disproportionate, colossal, hybrid, and even monstrous

forms. As we gather from the lectures on aesthetics, symbolic art is quintessentially identified with oriental art, and especially the Egyptian one: the Sphinx or the pyramids – enormous, sublime architectures that do not immediately reveal a spiritual content, but refer to it, in Hegelian terms, as symbols.

The spirit here is not yet known, it cannot have its only adequate form, that is, the human one: the artistic manifestation of its freedom and superiority over nature is then only negative, that is, it consists in striving towards an ever more exaggerated and sublime representation, which wants to erase the natural element through the natural element itself, without being able to free itself from it and know itself as spirit. In short, the divine is an enigma to itself and to the world. The enigma is precisely the deadly one of the Sphinx, asking which being, speaking in a single voice, is transformed from a quadruped into a biped and then into a three-legged being, and killing anyone who fails to answer. The spirit is still only this unanswered enigma, an expressive tension that finds no expression, and thus cannot yet know itself but is still trapped in an enigmatic symbolism, in which the true, divine content is always given negatively as something beyond. Corresponding to this is the lack of freedom and self-consciousness of the human subject: the very immortality of the Egyptians is not spiritual, but the mere continuation of the natural element in human-animal-divine hybrids. Architecture itself, the archetypic art of the symbolic, is not conceived, as the Greek temple will be, as the house of the god that hosts the community, but as an empty shell that contains and preserves what is dead (the pyramid) and tries to gain (always in a compensatory manner) value and content through sheer boundless magnitude and enigmatic expressions.

It is the Greek Oedipus who finds the solution: the answer to the enigma of the Sphinx is the human being. After giving the correct answer, Oedipus kills the Sphinx by crushing it down on the rocks (see A, 361). The solution of the Egyptian enigma causes the death of that world and the transition to the classical Greek world, centred precisely on the human figure not only as the centre of art but also as the solution to the riddle about the nature of the spirit (“know thyself”). With this, the paradigm of art shifts from architecture as the dead, empty, abstract shell of the pyramid, to the human statue of Greek sculpture, an ideal form of art, which no longer represents the divine only negatively in an attempt to find it, but as a stable, luminous presence. Such liberation is the emergence of beautiful, that is, classical, art: “*Beautiful art can belong only to those religions in which the principle is the concrete spirituality that has become free within itself, but is not yet absolute*” (E, 261), in which, that is, the spirit already knows itself to be free but retains the natural, exterior element as essential to its own manifestation. Again, as in the *Phenomenology*, at the same time as it gives the most splendid form to the pantheon of the corresponding religion,

beautiful art lays the groundwork for the demise of the very religion to which it belongs (namely, religion in the form of art). Beautiful art brings about the awareness that, from the point of view of the human relationship to the sacred, the exterior natural element no longer has a value in itself, but is the expression of the spirit, and thereby it already upholds, even if only potentially, the superiority of spirit over nature and the inadequacy of a divine grasped in the exteriority of natural forms, however perfect: "The advent of art announces the demise of a religion still bound to sensory externality. At the same time, since it seems to give religion the supreme transfiguration, expression, and splendour, it has elevated religion beyond its limitation" (E, 262).

Indeed, the free spirit of beautiful religion still expresses itself in a form of nature, in contrast with its claimed superiority over it. When the purifying force of the concept makes such contrast untenable, the pantheon, the scattered and disorganized multiplicity of gods, will be forced, first submitted to fate in tragedy and then ridiculed in comedy, to give way to the single and fully spiritual god of Christianity. The very feeling of satisfaction, of being at home in front of the beautiful artwork, is, for the artist and the viewer alike, the symptom of the conquest and confirmation of the awareness of the freedom of the spirit. However, such awareness can progressively only find its adequate expression in thought. This is why beautiful art, although it allows the free spirit to come to light, "is only a stage of liberation, not the supreme liberation itself" (E, 262). The latter only comes with the transition to the manifestation of the absolute spirit in the purely spiritual form of revealed religion and with the philosophical reflection on it: "Beautiful art (like the religion peculiar to it) has its future in genuine religion" (E, 262). From this moment on, art can no longer be the adequate manifestation of the absolute spirit, which definitively withdraws into the interiority of the human being.¹²

If the spirit manifests itself as interiority, then art must show an absence more than a presence. Or, more precisely, what we perceive must be able to connect us with a higher level that we find not in the work itself, but in the feeling and reflection to which it compels us. This is the core principle of romantic art:

The other mode of incongruity between the Idea and the figuration is this: the infinite form, subjectivity, is . . . the inmost depth, and the god is known not as merely seeking its shape or satisfying himself in an external shape, but as finding himself only within himself, thus assuming his adequate shape in the spiritual alone. So art, romantic art, gives up the task of showing God as such in external shape and by means of beauty; it displays him as only condescending to appearance, and presents the divine as inwardness in the externality from which it disengages itself.

This externality can therefore here appear in a contingent relation to its meaning.

(E, 261)

The systematic placement of art in the *Encyclopaedia* then also offers a historical periodization of the role and value of art. Such periodization tells us, without the slightest misunderstanding, that the manifestation of the absolute spirit in the form of beautiful art belongs to an irrevocably past era: it is a unique and unrepeatable moment in history. With regard to its ultimate function, namely the manifestation of the divine and its human appropriation in an artistic form, art is something of the past; in this it has been replaced by revealed religion and then by philosophy. Thus, the essential interconnection of art and (classical) beauty is also lost.¹³ The connection of art and religion, on the other hand, is not lost. The Christian revelation is not something immediately “actual” nor something that can be fixed in an unchanging shape. There is a historical side to the story of redemption as well, as the history of the definitive overcoming of naturalness and exteriority and the turn of human subjectivity to find the divine in itself, in the spirit through the spirit. With Christian religion, which – unlike pagan religion – is fully anthropomorphic, the god finally becomes human and fully enters the world. With a view to investigating the role and space of art in the world informed by the Christian principle, that is, of romantic art through its many stages and faces, we now need to turn to the lectures on aesthetics.¹⁴

Beyond the Last Work of Art: Dutch Painting and Subjective Humour

The fact that “nature is de-deified [*entgöttert*]” (ÄH, 182) does not mean a narrowing of artistic possibilities. First of all, art at the very least plays a non-dispensable ancillary role in the revelation itself and in the story of redemption, which has its effects on the world, so that

this circle is endlessly enlarged and encompasses the most unlimited variety. For, even though that objective story constitutes the substantial side of the soul, it still develops itself in all directions, presents single points of itself or itself in always-changing variety, always in new traits, always shaping itself in new ways as opposed to nature, which always remains identical to itself. Besides, the soul is able to handle the whole material of nature with respect to that grand content and to employ it for its own purpose.

(ÄH, 183)

The romantic art form spans a very long period of time and, with it, completely different types and styles of art. In its long history, this art form goes through different moments as the history of redemption unfolds. Hegel groups them into three main stages: the “religious circle” (the religious content as such in its figuration), the “mundane circle” (the reflection of spirituality in the reality of the world), and “formal subjectivity”, that is, subjectivity breaking free from substantial content.¹⁵ The first two moments are characterized by the need for the configuration of a Christian imagery, the dissemination of the Christian principle, and the emergence of corresponding mundane institutions, values, beliefs and so on: art’s ancillary function essentially corresponds to them. The third moment reflects the fulfilment of the release of subjectivity, which at first glance corresponds to art breaking completely free from religion.

In the third moment, the particular subject as such comes into play, no longer with a substantial purpose to accomplish, but as, “the subjective, the exterior as such, which comes here to its freedom, unsubdued to the concept, the formal objectivity, abandoned by the higher content, the objectivity raising itself to its own feet outside of the highest sphere” (ÄK, 144–145). With this, mundane exteriority acquires its own dignity if only as an object of artistic representation, and “painting in particular depicts present reality” (ÄH, 200). Such independence can take two main interwoven directions, which we can roughly define as that of naturalism and that of subjectivism. The former is that of an increasingly perfect and borderline virtuosic imitation of nature, in which only the technical skill of the author matters. The latter is the only apparently opposite one of a self-celebration of the creating subject as such, with respect to which the reality of the world and its value disappear, as in some extreme forms of Romantic irony. Consistently with his own systematic assumptions, Hegel clearly criticizes both directions as such: in them, art is indeed deprived of any function and literally drags itself beyond itself and dissolves.

Nonetheless, the possibility of combining a deepening prosaic and profane subjectivity with a genuinely artistic ability for spiritual transfiguration is also provided here, however difficult. We have, then, something that Hegel appreciates and calls “objective humour”.¹⁶ The paradigmatic case is Dutch painting. Here, the extreme skill that the painter uses in the representation of the most common objects and details is not self-serving. In it, instead, the spirit of a people takes on a fully visible body:

Dutch cities had liberated himself from worldly and spiritual domination. Their political freedom, their well-being, they conquered it all themselves, through bourgeois virtue and protestant devoutness. Here the principle is to feel satisfied in common reality. Such subjects

cannot satisfy the higher sense, but a closer consideration reconciles us with them.

(ÄH, 200)

The rich and satisfying portrayal of existing reality mirrors the material and spiritual satisfaction and wellbeing of the Dutch, a wellbeing that has been won through the virtues of modernity. This perfect art of the appearance, through which the most fleeting and banal of moments (a grimace, a reflection) is beautifully fixed and eternalized, “is the triumph of art over transitoriness” (ÄH, 201).

Despite the extreme prosaic nature of the theme, the result of the (apparently) completed human takeover of and control over nature and the consequent loss of the latter’s sacredness and mystery, a depiction along the lines of Dutch painting is still, in the broadest sense, a work of art as it still retains an adequately exteriorized, interesting content. There is no transcendence left, only a satisfied feeling of comfort and familiarity, which is – literally – the last “work” of art: “The feeling at home in the domains of art is, at last, the final stone in the building of art” (ÄH, 200). This feeling of completely being at home as the last work of art is important as evidence of the definitive overcoming of that transcendence which, to an ever-decreasing extent, has characterized art up to this point. But, however appreciated by Hegel, objective humour in his sense does not suffice for an attempt at actualization. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of contemporary art forms that both are certainly valid as art and allow us to feel completely at home. The greatness of contemporary art manifests itself, if anything, in *not* making us feel at home. Such divergence, too, gives a measure of the difference that exists between the Hegelian orientation, which is still bound to art as a form of absolute spirit, and thus to the classical pattern, and ours, which is – or at least should be – beyond that pattern. As I will suggest, objective humour may still be important to us, but only to the extent that it combines its ability to transfigure and preserve the ordinary and the transient with less reassuring art forms in which we do *not* feel at home.¹⁷

To expatiate upon this point, we need to go back to less conciliative and more subjectivistic forms of humour, where we find the final and extreme drift of romantic art (and art in general), which is already beyond the boundaries of art. It is what Hegel calls “humour” or “the humoristic” (ÄH, 201–202) in the pejorative sense as purely “subjective humour”, that is, the most extreme form of artistic subjectivism:

In humour it is the person of the artist, the peculiar subjectivity, which produces itself. We no longer have to do with an objective content, but the artist himself comes to the fore, and his coming to the fore is such

that what he produces is only irony of himself, a dissolution of what begins to become objective. It is a presentation of the subject that throws away himself and every material that he uses.

(ÄH, 201–202)

In its most extreme phase, with Jean Paul as its figurehead in Germany,

the humorous subdues every material only to its own whims, so that no content is any longer respected in the material, and in fact it gets arbitrarily utilized by the subject and becomes really crazy. Thus, it is only the art of the appearance showing itself, as the interest does not lie in the content.

(ÄH, 202)

In the humorous, the matter decays into the object of the most unrestrained arbitrariness on the part of the creating subject, whose only goal is to narcissistically display himself. Let us compare this with the ideal situation of classical art as described in the *Encyclopaedia*, where we were told that

the subject is the formality of activity and the work of art is an expression of the god only when there is no sign of subjective particularity in it, and the content of the indwelling spirit has conceived and brought itself forth into the world, without admixture and unsullied by its contingency.

(E, 260)

For art to be “absolute” and the content to amount to a spiritual and universal truth, the artist must not leave any trace of himself, of his distinctiveness, in his work, which only then can truly be an expression of the divine and the spirit of a people.¹⁸ This state of affairs is now completely overturned, as humour in art is the expression of a diametrically opposite tendency. No object is sacred any more, neither the natural nor the spiritual; what matters is only the arbitrary subjectivity of the artist, which fills the entire work with itself and in front of which the objective content can only disappear.

As was to be expected, this is the place where art goes beyond itself and towards its actual “end”. This is because the very foundation of art is lost in the humorous, as we can effectively gather from Hegel’s recapitulation of the function of art up to the present time:

What we have considered up to here had as its groundwork the unity of concept and reality. This unity is the concept of art itself, as its interest is to present the substantial fashion of the consciousness of a people.

(ÄH, 202–203)

From the oriental world to Greece and up to the first forms of romantic art, what come to light through art “are worldviews, religions of a people. These are the spirits of the peoples” (ÄH, 203). The highest demand to an artist is to put in his work his belonging to the spirit of his time or people, his serious and absorbed feeling as if he were at one with, or rather identical to, the handled contents: “The artist must believe in his topics, his natural self must be in unity with it, and the artwork proceeds from the undivided interiority. This is the fundamental relationship required for art to be present in its wholeness. A great artistic epoch demands such intimacy” (ÄH, 203). This intimate belief has now disappeared. The watershed, as we saw, is not to be found in the transition from classical to romantic art (i.e. the spreading of Christianity), but in the Protestant Reformation, which Hegel believes to be the nearest onset of modernity. Catholicism, however much it claims to worship God in spirit, in fact still makes extensive use of images and indeed, in its wake, the most beautiful works of art are still created. Only with the Reformation is the link between truth and exteriority truly severed, and at the same time, the latter acquires its own independence. The Reformation teaches to seek the divine in the pure spirit, to make it inhabit only in one’s own subjective interiority, which thus becomes at the same time universal.

The final withdrawal of the divine or truth from the sensible form that occurs with the Reformation sets the question of art in the modern world in an entirely new way. If in fact the early stages of the romantic form had coincided with the epochal need for a configuration and dissemination of the principle of Christianity also through artistic means, the last and extreme stage reflects the lucid acceptance of the impossibility of appropriating such a perfectly spiritual principle by means that are not perfectly spiritual. Hegel’s uncompromising condemnation of the Catholic Church is to be read in this light: the failure to separate exteriority from interiority results in the divine being an external object, a *positum*, and here is the primary origin of all the evils of Catholicism, from crusades to celibacy, from indulgences to pauperism, from the separation of clergy and laity to the opposition to science and progress. The Lutheran principle, attributing all substantial content to the internal forum of subjectivity, reserves the prosaic, the arbitrary, the humorous to art. Art, therefore, is no longer a serious way to present the highest contents:

When . . . for example a protestant represents Maria, in truth he is not doing it seriously. The self, the innermost subjectivity of the artist, and such content are not identical. When a modern time individual represents such objects, this is not the truthful way in which the individual becomes conscious of them.

(ÄH, 203)

Art, as we saw, had “as its groundwork the unity of concept and reality” (ÄH, 202), whereas

on the contrary, in the situation to which we arrived, the relation is different. The material has left the self, the reasoning has become free, the material exterior, so that art becomes free, subjective skilfulness, to which the material is indifferent.

(ÄH, 203–204)

As it is now only a particular, profane, private subjectivity that comes to the fore in all its possible shapes, no figure of the divine, and more in general no substantial universal content, can adequately be manifested in art, and “with this art is concluded [*vollendet*]” (ÄH, 204). Unlike the reassuring conclusion represented by objective humour, still relatable even from the perspective of classical art, here we have a much more definite dissolution and uncertainty. It is from here, however, that the story can go on.

The New Sacred of Art and the Revenge of the Sphinx

The discussion of the relationship between art and religion has taken us from natural, non-artistic religions to the symbolic search for an artistic shape of the divine, to the classical achievement of this shape, to its romantic fragmentation and art’s ancillary role, up to the severing of the tie with religion and, with it, to art’s “conclusion”. We may now gain a new vantage point by asking what is the place of art after severing its tie to religion and what remains of this tie. As a matter of fact, right after proclaiming the conclusion and self-overcoming of art, Hegel continues:

Yet in this self-transcendence art is nevertheless a withdrawal of man into himself, a descent into his own breast, whereby art strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes *Humanus* its new holy of holies [*zu ihrem neuen Heiligen den Humanus macht*]: i.e. the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates. Herewith the artist acquires his subject-matter in himself and is the human spirit actually self-determining and considering, meditating, and expressing the infinity of its feelings and situations: nothing that can be living in the human breast is alien to that spirit any more.

(A, 607)¹⁹

The space of this universally human is clearly too broad and undetermined to prompt a proper philosophical investigation. I want to point out, however, that we might retrieve a sense of sacredness even in this space, though

in a radically different sense from the now-dissolved proper sacred of art. Retrieving such a sense, with the due qualifications, also means resisting the idea that Hegel believed in the full-blown rationality of the present time and hence in art's full irrelevance.²⁰

It is crucial here to stress, first of all, what this new sacred can *no longer* be or do. In its last stage, art no longer delivers shared and substantial contents in a binding way; hence, every artwork can be received in the most diverse ways or may not even be received at all. It offers a view of the world and humanity which is free and virtually unlimited. Most of all, art is a free individual creation (an artwork is always “this” artwork) of an individual, aimed in our age at individuals individually and not collectively. The viewer's freedom matches the artist's freedom. The artwork does not address all people any more; it is not the grounding expression of a shared ethical life (people may not share or may even ignore an artwork). Charging art with a directly binding role (political, religious, moral, etc.) means pleading for an educational role of art in a diminutive scholastic sense, committing to bad taste or kitsch, or worse, exploiting art for external purposes (propaganda, indoctrination, etc.). The new sacred of art cannot be located here, in the attempt to revive its highest, universal role, that is, the paradigm of the classical.

Instead, it should be searched in its very dissolution. The very “partial”²¹ and “past” character of art seems to make it suitable for a protection and enrichment of the individual, which may originate in the sphere of private appreciation, needs, and interests, but may lead him to a less narrow, more open and universal, even cosmopolitan, view. By moving “up from below”, from the private individual sphere, art can help develop reflective capacities and worldviews, thus turning into the ground in which universal forms can concretely take root. This also means providing the individual with access to different cultural, historical, and geographical contents, worldviews, ways of thinking, and so forth.²² As a matter of fact, Hegel positively refers to a number of interesting examples of artistic and cultural “pluralism” and “syncretism” in this regard, first and foremost Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* (see A, 610–611).²³ But, even more than that, art, without aiming at recreating a universal sacred, can act as such as a reminder of the sacredness of the individual as such. In other words, an art whose value no longer lies in its universality and absoluteness can stand for the irreducible value of individuality, independently of its own aspirations to universality and absoluteness. This is exactly because the breaking free of the divine content from the existence in the form of art has led to the disenchantment and loss of mystery that is typical of art in its “dissolution”: let us just compare the full immanence of naturalism and subjectivism (Dutch painting, Jean Paul, the novel, etc.) with the absolute mystery and riddle of symbolic art (the Sphinx . . .). And yet, in breaking down that divine mystery, art

has brought to light the human as a riddle of its own, that no rationality, however effectively deployed, can solve. Severing the tie between art and religion or, as we may put it, between the exterior configuration of the work and its content paves the way, in a sort of short-circuit, to the return of the symbolic in art:

In thus drawing together and concatenating material raked up from the four corners of the earth and every sphere of reality, humour turns back, as it were, to symbolism where meaning and shape likewise lie apart from one another, except that now it is the mere subjective activity of the poet which commands material and meaning alike and strings them together in an order alien to them.

(A, 601)

The self-transcendence of art, its projecting itself beyond itself, thus takes the shape of a folding of art onto its own origins, while staying fully aware of its history (spiritual, technical, etc.). Of course, for Hegel this is, strictly speaking, first of all a loss and a dissolution: he discusses such return to the symbolical in the framework of his dismissive treatment of Jean Paul. And yet, if we go beyond his own systematic focus as the guiding purpose of our investigation, as the next chapters will try to spell out in more detail, we may also read these lines against the grain. In this doubling-over of art onto its own origins, there is space for a new sacred, which, moreover, is *only* accessible to art, as it escapes the too coarse-grained, universal-aiming network of philosophy, rational right, and, indeed, true religion. Humanity – the being human and the human being – seen not as a universal concept but as the infinite empirical possibilities of “the depths and heights of the human heart as such, . . . its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates” (A, 607) is too fragmented and contingent a topic to be addressed as such by those universal forms: *individuum est irrationale*, as we might say. In fact, those forms *should not* address or try to regulate (or standardize) that infinite plurality, as such an attempt would be intrusive or outright totalitarian.²⁴ Art, on the other hand, by being always there as this specific artwork, can thematize or express that plurality without regulating or standardizing it, at least in principle.²⁵ In doing so, it protects, communicates, and develops it in infinite ways.

The new sacred of art, then, is this potentially infinite particularity “unsubdued to the concept” (ÄK, 145), which art narrates and embodies through the most diverse forms, just as symbolic art had done with its content, a symbolic art, however, that is now combined with that principle of attention to and transfiguration of the detail and the banal that is peculiar to Dutch painting and that allows it to defy death and the extreme transience of the everyday and the seemingly irrelevant.²⁶ In this return to

the symbolic, this all-too-human art rediscovers a form of sacredness, no longer in the sense of a divine, transcendent enigma to be solved and put in an immanent form, but in that of an enigma which is now fully immanent, which cannot be solved by philosophically resorting to self-knowledge, but one that requires art's fragmentary, individual thematization, attention, and a specific and irreducible diversity of expressions such as that of humour. Here, if you will, lies the revenge of the Sphinx over Oedipus and of the enigmatic (no longer just oriental, at this point) over the pure brightness of the Greek (or Western?) "rational" consciousness and its neuroses. Here we have precisely that encounter between art's ability to transfigure and give meaning to the banal and the everyday and that of *not* making us feel at home in it. This, which in Hegel is the margin and drift of art, must be the track to follow, with Hegel but, so to speak, against the Hegelian mainstream, in order to actualize his aesthetics. The new sacred of art, we may conclude, is no longer associated with the ideal paradigm of the classical, but with an unstoppable oscillation between the two poles that in Hegel take the name of the symbolic and the humorous. It *is*, indeed, this oscillation.

Notes

- 1 For overall reconstructions of the link between art and religion, see Jaeschke 1982; Walker 2007; Amoroso 2014.
- 2 For a broader discussion, see Siani 2017, 2021, and, on Hegel's early aesthetics, see Farina 2017.
- 3 See Siani 2013b.
- 4 On this, see Pinkard 2008 and, with a specific focus on politics and the subjectivisation of substance before modernity, Bubner 2007. See also Gethmann-Siefert 2005, 204–222; Sell 1999. In general, on the aesthetic theme in the *Phenomenology*, see Garelli 2010; Speight 2009, and, on the "figures" of subjectivity, Iannelli 2006.
- 5 On this transition as the ground of Hegel's understanding of modernity and metaphilosophical commitment to the primacy of philosophy, see Siani 2020b.
- 6 Put otherwise: "The artistic process and the art object itself embody Hegel's claim that objects are not in fact independent, waiting to be apprehended, but that we and the world's objects are part of a mutually determining whole. It is this ability to show us explicitly what we do implicitly – creatively participate in the structuring of our world – that makes art part of Absolute Spirit and part of our freedom" (Moland 2019, 37). Nuzzo 2006, 308, raises the stronger claim "that the way in which Hegel describes the general task of a philosophy of absolute spirit is itself already *aesthetic*, i.e., implies a perspective on spirit that is aesthetic *even before* 'art' has emerged as a thematic moment of spirit's absolute reality and knowledge, and it is aesthetic *in order* for art to emerge as absolute spirit's first moment".
- 7 On artists' reflectivity and the artistic practice, see Speight 2008.
- 8 "The task to make progress in the comprehension of the actualization of freedom, that is to say, to transfer and put in practice the *concept* of freedom,

can no longer be fulfilled through pure aesthetic means. Something different is required. To allow for a successful understanding of the justification of fundamental norms, such understanding has to be embedded in a form of life whose authority no longer rests on beauty, but on something more prosaic. This means, in turn, that these norms must be instituted not in a mythological but in a real historical time, a condition that according to Hegel Christianity fulfilled for the first time” (Pinkard 2008, 560).

- 9 This, in turn, is bound to Hegel’s growing interest in and knowledge of art as such, partly for didactic purposes (Hegel first taught aesthetics in Heidelberg in 1818). For a discussion of this development and of art in the *Encyclopaedia*, see Gethmann-Siefert 2000; Siani 2009.
- 10 About this, see first Pinkard 2007, who claims the plausibility of both the systematic and the historical succession as tied to Hegel’s “social and developmental conception of agency” (8).
- 11 Because of its structural instability and vastity, both historical and conceptual, as well as of its inherent imbalance and “finitude”, some interpreters have suggested to focus on symbolic, rather than classical art, as a Hegelian paradigm appealing to our time: see, among others, D’Angelo 1989; Kwon 2001, 2005b. For an innovative interpretation of Hegel’s notion of symbol with regard to the issue of art criticism, see Farina 2015.
- 12 “The central idea here is that for Hegel, the reason why we moderns ought not to emulate Greek beauty is not based on a difference between the Greek culture and our own (or between their values and our own), but rather on a deficiency within Greek beauty itself. In other words, what is problematic about Greek beauty is not that it is incompatible with the values of modernity, but that it gives expression to and is grounded in an idea that is ultimately inconsistent. This means that the Greeks would have had as much reason as we do to question the ultimate significance and value of beauty from Hegel’s point of view. And in fact, according to Hegel, they did question it, as becomes obvious in some of their own artistic creations” (Peters 2015, 5).
- 13 On the (neglected) centrality of the link between beauty and the thesis of art’s past character, see Peters 2015, 1.
- 14 As it is known, what we call Hegel’s *Aesthetics* is a collection of notes from his lectures, put together and published in book-form by his student Hotho (A). For philosophical and philological reasons, in the past few decades Hotho’s classic edition has been supported, or in some cases replaced, as a source for Hegel’s aesthetics, by the available students’ manuscripts from different courses that have been published in the meanwhile, such as ÄH, ÄK, and ÄP. In this book, I widely rely on the manuscripts (especially ÄH), but I also make reference to Hotho’s printed edition. For a discussion of the various editions and transcriptions and of the various philological issues, see, among others, Gethmann-Siefert 2005, 15–28; Houlgate 2021. For an exposition of the system of individual arts in the lectures on aesthetics, on which I cannot dwell here, see Valagussa 2014.
- 15 I take the denominations of the three stages from ÄH, whereas A presents a slightly different terminology, which however corresponds in the substance.
- 16 “Romantic art was from the beginning the deeper disunion of the inwardness which was finding its satisfaction in itself and which, since objectivity does not completely correspond with the spirit’s inward being, remained broken or indifferent to the objective world. In the course of romantic art this opposition developed up to the point at which we had to arrive at an exclusive interest,

- either in contingent externality or in equally contingent subjectivity. But if this satisfaction in externality or in the subjective portrayal is intensified, according to the principle of romantic art, into the heart's deeper immersion in the object, and if, on the other hand, what matters to humour is the object and its configuration within its subjective reflex, then we acquire thereby a growing intimacy with the object, a sort of *objective* humour" (A, 609).
- 17 In this sense, I only partially agree with the suggestion by Moland 2019 that art should "make the strange familiar and the familiar strange" (19) and that, as for the second side in particular, art "is on Hegel's view one of the ways we can resist the given. It facilitates this resistance, to put Hegel's complex thought into everyday language, by making the familiar strange: by interrupting our habitual interaction with the world, in which we think of the world as given, and allowing us to sense our participation in it" (4). In my view, art can certainly both make the strange familiar and the familiar strange for Hegel, but we should separate the former role as rather (though not exclusively) fitting in with the classical pattern from the latter role as rather (though not exclusively) following the pattern of art's pastness. I have the impression that, in her search for (idealistic) unity throughout the book, Moland tends to over-conflate the two aspects beyond Hegel's own position, whereas my emphasis here, and especially in Chapter 4, is rather on the fracture between the two patterns as a way to actualize Hegel's thesis of art's past character. See also Peters 2015, 134: "Unlike the aesthetic human ideal, the objects and scenes depicted in Dutch paintings are in themselves decidedly non-beautiful; the only chance for them to ever become aesthetically appealing is through artistic representation. This expansion of subject matter implies a radical change in the structure and status of art for Hegel".
 - 18 Here, one may recall Hegel's famous reply to the thesis of the non-existence of Homer as a single individual: "If this view is supposed only to mean that the poet, as subject, vanishes in face of his work, then this is the highest praise; for in that case nothing is said except that no subjective manner of thinking and feeling is recognizable in the work, and this is certainly true of the Homeric poems. What they reveal is solely the thing itself, the people's objective way of looking at things" (A, 1050).
 - 19 On the *Humanus* as the new sacred (an allusion to an epic fragment by Goethe), and in general on the topic at hand, the essential reference remains Donoghue 1982.
 - 20 Such idea is famously advanced by Pippin 2014, which I will discuss in chapter 4.
 - 21 For this expression, see the fundamental work by Henrich 1966, 15.
 - 22 For the importance of art thus conceived for a Hegelian theory of *Bildung*, see the next chapter.
 - 23 See Siani 2013a; Moland 2019, 134–144.
 - 24 See also Walker 2007, 289–290: "We encounter in Hegel's thought itself a principle of resistance to its own totalizing claims. That principle becomes manifest in both aesthetic and religious terms because speculative reason, when it engages with the actuality of aesthetic and religious experience, *itself reveals and indeed engenders the autonomous power of the sphere of representation*".
 - 25 For a concrete applied discussion of this point, see the idea of a *no code aesthetics* in the last chapter of this book.
 - 26 "One way to conceptualize art, then, is that the artist transforms the prosaic – the mundane, the everyday – into the poetic" (Moland 2019, 37).

3 (The Absence of) Art's Right

The previous chapter went to the core of our topic through a direct approach: by following the development of the link between art and religion across its different configurations and all the way up to the possibility of a “new sacred” of art, the centrality of the thesis of art’s past character as a sound philosophical tenet in Hegel’s thought, and as a topical idea for our own time has hopefully already come to the fore. In this third chapter, I will pursue a less traditional and more eccentric approach, endorsing the topicality of the thesis by discussing its place in what might seem to be the most unlikely portion of Hegel’s thought, namely his philosophy of right, where the issue of the role of art is at best marginal (1). As this chapter is going to show, by developing suggestions from the previous chapter, this very reticence unlocks a well-defined image of the modern shape and role of art, as well as of the modern configuration of the relationship between the individual and the state. Art that is “past” in Hegel’s sense has now at least the basic capacity of transmitting different options in terms of action and reflection in a non-binding and fictional, yet indirectly effective, way. Art is thus shown to play a paradigmatic part in individual development and education (*Bildung*) in modern ethical-political life, based on its “formal” contribution to the securing and enrichment of the individual’s particular experience (2), to the extent that the discussion of the place of art and of individual existence/action runs parallel to and can shed light on each other (3). Precisely because of its partial and past character, which motivates its absence from the philosophy of right, art (or at least certain artistic forms) can be interpreted as a time-adequate expression of individuality, demanding a careful reshaping of art’s “right” and politics, itself adequately reflected in Hegel’s laconicism (4).

Art and Right: Traces in the Void?

Among the portions of the system that have traditionally been most interesting for research on Hegel, aesthetics and the philosophy of right

undoubtedly take a prominent place. This has become all the truer in recent decades, as the publication of the manuscripts and transcripts of his lectures has sparked off some lively historical-philological discussions as well as actualizing attempts in both directions. Systematic attempts to bring the two fields together in order to further research in either area or the whole of Hegelian philosophy, on the other hand, have been less frequently pursued. This is quite unsurprising after all, since Hegel himself did not specifically address the relationship between art and right at any relevant systematic juncture in any detail in his mature philosophy. To be sure, the general relationship between forms of absolute spirit and politics is examined at several points. Likewise, Hegel engaged in important reflections on the relationship between religion and state, as well as on philosophy and state. Considerations on the relationship between art and right, on the other hand, have at most the status of digressions in Hegel's mature work. Based on this textual fact, it is hardly surprising that the discussion of the relationship between art and right is almost completely neglected in the literature.¹

One of the few passages in which such topic is directly addressed can illustrate this situation quite well; this is the famous footnote to the annotation in paragraph 270 of the *Philosophy of Right*, which will be our starting point. Here, Hegel treats the relation between right and absolute spirit as a side topic of the philosophy of right:

Religion, knowledge, and science have as their principle a form peculiar to each and different from that of the state. They therefore enter the state partly as *means* to education and a [higher] disposition, partly insofar as they are in essence *ends* in themselves to the extent that they have an external existence. In both these respects the principles of the state have, in their application, a bearing on them.

(PhR, 244)

Quite remarkably, in this first half of the footnote, art has been outright displaced from the triad of absolute spirit. In the second half, Hegel draws art back in, but gives it only a minor position, barely separated from merely natural conditions:

A comprehensive, concrete treatise on the state would also have to deal with those spheres of life as well as with art and merely natural conditions, and to consider their place in the state and their bearing on it. In this treatise, however, it is the principle of the state in its own special sphere which is being fully expounded in accordance with the Idea, and it is only in passing that reference can be made to the principles of religion, etc., and to the application of the right of the state to them.

(PhR, 244)

The principle of the modern state and the principle of art are thus shown to be *de facto* completely independent of each other.

Hegel's unambiguous view of the irrelevance of art in the statements under consideration seems to deny any non-episodic value to an investigation of "art's right". However, this very unambiguity may also be taken to point to a fairly hidden, or at least unforthcoming, layer of meaning, in which Hegel was not directly interested, but the explanation of which may provide important insights into art's right, its connection with art's past character, and more in general the relationship between art and politics. There are at least some clues pointing to this possibility: for example, the explicitly central ethical-political role of art and beauty in the young Hegel; the political centrality of tragedy and religion in the form of art as a whole, which Hegel held to be the core of political life in classical Greece as well as the birthplace of modern subjectivity²; the obvious coexistence of aesthetic and practical-political dimensions in Hegel's critique of typically modern figures, such as Romantic irony, the beautiful soul, and the like. Such clues would suggest that, in Hegel's mature notion of right and the modern state, the earlier (both in historical terms and in Hegel's own understanding) significance of art has been obliterated. As I am going to suggest, however, such outcome can be reversed in the claim not only of an emancipation of art in general but also of its renewed, though indirect, importance in political terms.

Let us then begin with the reasons of art's undisputable irrelevance and inadequacy in the domain of modern right, as grounded in art's immediacy, finitude, intuitive/sensible character, and structural link with naturality. Even the artistic ideal accomplished by classical art is not an eternal standard of perfection and harmony, but a historically conditioned variable,³ the accidental and unrepeatable meeting between the material externality of a work of art, the artist's creative power, and the viewer's responsiveness.⁴ It is the sensual, immediate self-fashioning of the idea, which is still burdened with and influenced by the element of nature. As to it, it is even inappropriate to speak of "absolute spirit" in the strict sense: "It is not the absolute spirit that enters into this consciousness" (E, 259). In fact, this is absolute spirit only in itself, implicitly (see E, 259), that is, absolute spirit not revealing itself as such spiritually, but only appearing in an external form, bound to the artist's arbitrariness and the randomness of material circumstances. It is, indeed, the limited spirit of a given people, taking not the form of free conceptual universality, but only that of a naturalistic, largely contingent polytheistic pantheon:

In such individuality of shaping the absolute spirit cannot be explicated; the spirit of beautiful art is therefore the limited spirit of a people, a spirit whose implicit universality, when advance is made to the

further determination of its riches, disintegrates into an indeterminate polytheism.

(E, 260, transl. modified)

However, this external finite – but beautiful – form already lays out and announces the spirit's self-consciousness as free and independent of nature. This is what gives art, as conceived by the paradigm of classical art and despite the limitations and provisos we have just seen, the right of abode in absolute spirit. As opposed to the earlier form of symbolic art, classical art is no longer just “the abstract, intrinsically unclear content, a mishmash of natural and spiritual elements” that strives “to bring itself to consciousness” (E, 261). Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that classical art too is essentially unable to bring the spirit to actual self-consciousness, because it can conceive of it only “semi-naturalistically”, that is, in the – however spiritually and consciously created, and therefore beautiful too – shape of nature:

The sensory externality in the beautiful, the *form of immediacy* as such, is at the same time a *determinacy of content*, and along with his spiritual determination the god also has within him at the same time the determination of a natural element or reality. – He contains the so-called *unity* of nature and spirit – i.e. the *immediate* unity, the form of intuition; and so not the spiritual unity, in which the natural is posited only as something ideal, something sublated, and the spiritual content stands in relation only to itself; it is not the absolute spirit that enters into this consciousness.

(E, 259, transl. modified)

Parallel to this, the ethical-political community within which the (in itself) absolute spirit takes the form of art holds on to a still semi-naturalistic orientation of action and the understanding of freedom. Since such community lacks subjective reflection and consciousness, its freedom is not the freedom of the subject through reason, but the freedom of the community member through custom:

On the subjective side the community is of course an ethical community, since it is aware of its essence as spiritual and its self-consciousness and actuality are herein elevated to substantial freedom. But encumbered with immediacy, the freedom of the subject is only custom, without infinite reflection into itself, without the subjective inwardness of *conscience*.

(E, 259)

Thus, freedom too has just the immediate and semi-natural form of a “custom”, in which no separation between the individual and the community has come about yet. At the systematically fundamental level of the *Encyclopaedia*, it is very clear that a direct correlation exists between the community being immediately – without reflection – “ethical”, the substantial form of freedom as custom, and the manifestation of the (in itself) absolute spirit in the art form. Hegel regards such correlation as a unique, unrepeatable, and obsolete moment in world history.⁵ This is why even ideal, classical art is “is only a stage of liberation, not the supreme liberation itself” (E, 262). Art could be considered to be the expression of the (in itself) absolute spirit only for an ethical-political community having in turn inadequate consciousness of freedom and the divine (and, correspondingly, of what it means to be human⁶). In the next step, I will outline the difference between such community and the modern state, so that then, against such backdrop, the different roles of art can come to the fore as well.

Matters of Education and the “Prodigious Strength and Depth” of Modern States

For Hegel, the affirmation of the (Christian) principle of the right of subjective freedom is the main watershed between antiquity and modernity, as we find in a passage from the *Philosophy of Right* that will remain of utmost importance throughout this book:

The right of the subject's *particularity*, his right to be satisfied, or in other words the right of subjective freedom, is the pivot and centre of the difference between antiquity and modern times. This right in its infinity is given expression in Christianity and it has become the universal effective principle of a new form of the world.

(PhR, 122)⁷

This new form of the world underlies all further developments and determinations:

Amongst the more specific shapes which this right assumes are love, romanticism, the quest for the eternal salvation of the individual, etc.; next come moral convictions and conscience; and, finally, the other forms, some of which come into prominence in what follows as the principle of civil society and as moments in the constitution of the state, while others appear in the course of history, particularly the history of art, science, and philosophy.

(PhR, 122)

Thus, not only are Greek religion in the form of art and the Christian revealed religion based on two opposing principles, a substantial ethical life and subjective freedom, respectively, but the political forms associated with them are too.⁸ As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the Reformation with its principle of *Eigensinn* (self-will, or obstinacy) constitutes the definitive turning point towards the modern political community: "It is a great obstinacy, the obstinacy which does honour to humanity, to refuse to recognize in one's disposition anything not justified by thought. This obstinacy is the characteristic of modern times, besides being the distinctive principle of Protestantism" (PhR, 15–16).⁹

The value of such "obstinacy", however, is carefully qualified and limited by Hegel. It is true that the individual has the right to obey only what he recognizes as rational, but this does not mean that personal insight is always capable of such rational insight. Laws and rules must apply regardless of the potential inadequacy of empirical and subjective recognition:

The right of giving recognition only to what my insight sees as rational is the highest right of the subject, although owing to its subjective character it remains a formal right; against it the right which *reason* qua the objective possesses over the subject remains firmly established.

(PhR, 127–128)

This lays the ground for the need of a subjective education or *Bildung*:

On account of its formal character, insight is capable equally of being true and of being mere opinion and error. The individual's acquisition of this right of insight is, from the standpoint of what is still the moral sphere, part and parcel of his particular subjective education [*Bildung*].

(PhR, 128)

Such education should be conceived of also as the space of a potentially critical distance between the subjective insight and the objective law, which, however, should not lead the subject to absolute scepticism.

The existence of such a space is a characteristic and at the same time a guarantee of freedom in the modern state.¹⁰ The relationship between the individual and the state in modern times is marked by structural tension, which also features in Hegel's relatively conciliatory presentation:

The principle of modern states has prodigious strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to progress to its culmination in the self-sufficient extreme of personal particularity, and yet at the same time brings it back to the substantial unity and so maintains this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself.

(PhR, 235)

Such “prodigious strength and depth” are obviously not an empirically given fact, but rather a principle informing reality: it is practically and philosophically unviable to just postulate the correspondence of all particular subjects with the universality of the state. The classical Greek community, the polis, had no such difficulty for Hegel, because such correspondence was immediate there, and the individual spontaneously agreed with the universal, as we saw in the previous paragraph. On the other hand, in modern times, the identification of the individual with the objectivity of norms, laws, customs, and so on, must always be, at least potentially, mediated by individual insight and is thus necessarily precarious. We no longer have a substantial ethical life, but we have right, which must indeed be objectively valid, but only by way of subjective mediation, that is, aware consent. Herein lies not only the prodigious strength but also the structural fragmentation and instability of the modern state, which is also its main difference from the ancient political community: the state needs to have the citizens’ consent, but this must be free and aware, that is, the citizen must also be able to refuse consent to the universal, if his rational insight does not make him see such laws and institutions as reasonable.¹¹

For this, the subject needs to have educated insight and a higher standpoint, through which the particular and the general will can be integrated into a free, rational consent and a spirit of trust:

This disposition is, in general, *trust* (which may pass over into a greater or lesser degree of educated insight), or the consciousness that my interest, both substantial and particular, is contained and preserved in another’s (i.e. in the state’s) interest and end, i.e. in the other’s relation to me as an individual. In this way, this very other is immediately not an other in my eyes, and in being conscious of this fact, I am free.

(PhR, 240)¹²

Only in this way, and therefore only precariously, can the two extremes, the reconciliation of which makes the modern state strong, be held together. A unification that comes about only through unreflective customary consensus or, worse, external coercion hardly agrees with a modern, free state; it is peculiar instead to despotisms or, at best, to pre-modern political conditions. In short, the modern state must be able to hold its “being a state” (i.e. the unity Hegel had found in the polis) and its “being modern” (i.e. based on and in pursuit of subjective freedom) together.

This is where the issue of individual *Bildung* or education comes to the fore in all its urgency.¹³ Such *Bildung* cannot take the shape of a top-down mechanic transmission of objective contents: it requires, instead, the possibility of a real distancing and even an alienation of the subject from the object. This need is contemplated by Hegel under the specific heading of “formal education” (*formelle Bildung*), which he explicitly links to art: “In

the life of the state as such lies the necessity of formal education and with it of the birth of sciences as well as of a cultured poetry and art in general" (PhG, 93). Modern political life *needs* such formal culture or education as a space for the personal, free, critical development, selection, and appropriation of different contents and perspectives, which end up *building* individual particularity as something that cannot be reduced to a universal concept. Just to be clear: this should not mean making room for a structurally atomistic, empty, over-blown subjectivity, programmatically rejecting or distancing itself from any potential objectification as such. Hegel openly and frequently attacks such forms of subjectivity and, what is most important for our topic, he does so also in the context of his criticism of late art forms such as Romantic irony and humour, aimed exactly at confirming that kind of subjectivity and lifting it over objective duties and burdens, and more in general over the prosaic character of the modern world, in which objective relations are to a large extent "fixed".¹⁴

However, the controversy against art as a mediator or enabler of such empty subjectivity is truly meaningful and urgent if associated to the overblowing of art itself, that is, to the philosophical postulate of the absolute, universal value of art and its superiority over philosophy, which Hegel criticized in the Romantic movement.¹⁵ In other terms, modern art, and subjective humour in particular, is a seriously justified polemical target insofar as it explicitly or implicitly claims to have the power of conveying the highest universal contents and providing binding ethical-political guidance (as it was the case in the classical community). If, on the other hand, one regards art as partial in contrast to the universality of philosophy and as a cultural asset or as a particular medium of a correspondingly particular subjectivity, then its specific contents become way less important or threatening from the perspective of right, and even the representation of a hypertrophic subjectivity may prove to be an effective – possibly critical – portrayal of the sociopolitical context in which it is rooted.¹⁶

Such interpretation leads to a positive reappraisal of the ethical-political value of the art of "formal subjectivity", understood as a new, "weak" paradigm of art, independent not only of the classic but even of the first two stages of the romantic one.¹⁷ The central thesis presented herein, building on what I suggested in the previous chapter, can be worded as follows: in the modern world, art is the privileged vehicle and even the most cogent pattern of the free, "formal" education or culture in the particular sphere of the individual, because of the communicative and thematic freedom it acquires, even beyond what Hegel suggested himself. Set in such a formal framework, art can be considered to be the paradigmatic figure of a resistance or rather a "reminder" of the particular subjectivity as such, within, but also at least potentially opposed to, the socio-political "normalization"¹⁸ and absorption of individual existence into the fixing of all

objective relations. Here, art bears formal witness to the fact that, in order to form concrete universality, the empirical individual must recognize the general objectivity of law as the basis for the protection of his own particularity, and not as demanding the suppression of that individuality.¹⁹

In the modern age, art can do that just because it has lost the ability to convey substantial contents, an ability that was essential to it in the classical age. Its contents and forms are now of the most diverse kind, for they encompass the whole field of human characters and manifestations. This happens in an always incomplete (partial) and non-binding way, so art is no longer the basis of ethical life. This also has implications on the artist's role and figure. Compared to classical, beautiful ethical life, it looks as if in modernity all connections between the artist and society are severed. Whereas in the classical art form the artist is the mediator between the ethical life of his people and its sensible expression, the modern artist uses the work of art as an image of his own self, without regard to its substantial content. Certainly, there is a risk of artistic elitism, incommunicability, excessive eccentricity, in this situation. However, the artist's detachment from the community does not necessarily result in a betrayal or in an alienated relationship (as the young Hegel thought: see, e.g., FS1, 46 and 361), but it can also appear as a plausible, adequate reflection or interpretation of the *Zeitgeist*. Precisely because art can no longer convey any substantial content in an authoritative way, it can drive the contemplating individual to a free, unconstrained, and multifaceted reflection that does not displace subjective particularity but, on the contrary, presupposes it. Artistic production can no longer be rooted in universally shared customs, traditions, and myths, since modern society is too heterogeneous, particularized, and at the same time potentially cosmopolitan.²⁰ Thus, although it cannot directly and bindingly mediate universal contents, it can, by submitting different particular ones to the individual reflection of the recipient, promote the education and consciousness of the individual – not through imposition, but through a free and “personalised” process of selection and appropriation.²¹ Due to its sensible and also concretely enjoyable character, art has the advantage of being accessible to a broader and more differentiated audience, in contrast to philosophical education or religious affiliation, which are bound to certain contents and competences.

Art's ability to refrain from the relevance of a given content and to refer to the general form of reflection makes it also conducive to the acquisition (or reacquisition) of historically and geographically foreign forms. *Bildung* essentially includes the moment of negation in the form of distancing,²² in which the individual or a community renounces its immediacy in order to gain a higher and more complex standpoint. Art, insofar as inherently linked to its spiritual and historical development, can play an important role here. It allows us to turn our gaze away from

the present for a moment, to let it wander freely and let it return to the present with a changed, more conscious or complex look. It is a break-point in the narrow horizon of private individuality, yet one that does not imply the suppression of subjective particularity, but rather calls for the perception of the possibility of distancing, and hence of critique, including ethical-political one. Such critique is not a prejudiced self-assertion of empirical subjectivity against state authority or binding norms, but a more or less conscious contribution to the rationality and freedom of the latter. The momentary distancing from the present can lead to progress into the future.

The Parallel Central Marginality of Art and the Individual

Just because of its past and partial character, art can effectively embody and protect the particularity of individual existence and the aspirations of individual self-realization within modern ethical life, including, where needed, the option to resist abstract or totalitarian temptations.²³ The parallel between the configuration and function of art and those of individual existence is, in this regard, a constitutive element, as the very use of the term “formal subjectivity” for the last stage of art testifies. Neither art nor individual existence can ever claim to reach full conceptuality and universality. But, for the same reason, as already argued by the young Hegel against any form of political, religious, and philosophical unilateralism, it is impossible for universal thought to adequately deal with and capture such “imperfection” in a constructive way.²⁴ In order to sharpen such parallel and thus get closer to the position of both art and individual existence in modern times, we do not need to reject the Hegelian perspective, but to overturn it. Instead of adopting Hegel’s systematic angle of a rationally grounded ethical life and the attendant demands and restrictions, we need to look from the bottom up at the figure of particular subjectivity that is, at the same time, the distinctive feature of art in modernity. Neither comes very much to the fore against the backdrop of a rational ethical life, in which the individual contribution mostly takes the form of following well-known, reasonable rules of conducts: “In an *ethical* community, it is easy to say what someone must do, what are the duties he has to fulfil in order to be virtuous: he has simply to follow the well-known and explicit rules of his own situation” (PhR, 157).

On the other hand, both individual action and the art form play a central role where the rational ethical community is not yet, or no longer, there.²⁵ In the former case, ethical life is largely non-objective yet, and is mostly incorporated and actualized by individual action (what Hegel calls *sittliche*

Handlung, or ethical action, in the *Phenomenology*), which takes on an explicitly artistic shape and frame:

The phenomenon of virtue proper is commoner when societies and communities are uncivilized, since in those circumstances ethical conditions and their actualization are more a matter of individual preference or the distinctive natural genius of an individual. For instance, it was especially to Hercules that the ancients ascribed virtue. In the states of antiquity, ethical life had not grown into this free system of an objective order self-subsistently developed, and consequently it was by the distinctive genius of individuals that this defect had to be made good.

(PhR, 158)

In the foundation of the polis, the individual's heroic, artistic action²⁶ and, in parallel, the art form actually played a primary role in the constitution of ethical life. The latter, however, is already largely present in an objective form under the conditions of modernity, which are therefore prosaic, so that art and genial individuality as such no longer play a primary role.²⁷ Nevertheless, and this concerns the second possibility, that is, the "no longer", the potential weakening or destruction of ethical life in modernity is always lurking, both because of external crises (wars, catastrophes, etc.) and the structurally disruptive and, to a good extent, untameable tendencies of civil society, markets, and so forth.²⁸ Clearly, effective patterns of individual education that, without endangering subjective freedom, may supply a much-needed factor of integration for the structural instability of modern ethical life should be envisaged in this connection too.

Formal subjectivity, which seemed like a merely irrational reaction to the politicization, rationalization, and normalization of all relations of modern existence, turns out to express, instead, a need that is not only legitimate for the single individual but also indispensable to modern ethical life and the modern state.²⁹ The right to particularity must be protected and fulfilled, yet not in the sense of an empty and hostile withdrawal from the world or the hypocritical self-satisfaction of the beautiful soul, against which Hegel argues both in his philosophy of right and in his aesthetics, but in the sense of a constant reconciliation with the objectivity and validity of ethical life. "Re-conciliation" and not simply "conciliation", as the integration of the subject in ethical life is no longer immediate and harmonious as it was in the polis, but it must be possible in the mediating space of autonomous individual reflection, insight, and recognition, not teleologically imposed from the outside. It is precisely the art form as partial, itself in need of mediation, and subject-oriented that can best shed light on this need and enrich its content.³⁰

It turns out that, even in modernity, a living ethical-political need for art can be asserted, and therefore a new role can be given to it. But such assertion remains necessarily conditional on the prerequisite partiality and past character of art with regard to its highest possibility. Such a prerequisite is rooted in the transition from antiquity to modernity: rejecting art's past character means rejecting the reality of that transition, based on which right should not intermingle, as far as possible, with either art or the particularity of individual existence. If, on the contrary, one assumes art to be superior to philosophy or to the prose of modern life, then an irreconcilable conflict with the view of modern ethical life as based on subjective freedom becomes inevitable, and art becomes something blurred and irrational, "formally" inclining to an equally irrationalist view of ethical life and politics. From this point of view, as already suggested in the first chapter, the project of an aesthetic education seems paradoxically promising under modern conditions, but not in the sense of its Romantic advocates: education through art is only conceivable on the basis of its partiality and no longer of its primacy. Finally, it should be pointed out that claiming a new ethical-political role for art does not and cannot mean suggesting that state power (or any political power) could claim a right to control or steer the content of art and artists. The reason, again, is not the claim of the absolute freedom or even superiority of art over philosophy and rationally founded right; it is, conversely, art's partiality and past character. When the political power entrusts art with the task of acting as a direct ideological mediator for certain substantial contents, it jeopardizes not only art but also the modern ethical-political community. In the political exploitation of art for ideological or propagandistic purposes and the associated promotion or condemnation of certain artistic products, an element of obscurantism and oppression can already be found, regardless of contents and intents.

Between Free Spirit and Commodities: Towards a Modern Politics of Art

Based on the argument pursued herein, Hegel's laconicism on art's right and more generally on art and politics is in fact not only evidence of his extreme caution against a potential confusion between his own political and aesthetic concept with a Romantic or Schellingian one, but it also shows to have specific philosophical relevance, as suggested at the outset. An art that no longer conveys any substantial content, but expresses instead the whole of the "humanus", is just not a relevant object for a scientific philosophy of right. Unlike religion, art cannot raise great difficulties for a modern ethical-political community based on subjective freedom, as long as the state remains committed to the latter as its principle, and hence

to the possibility of a rational and discursive criticism and a negotiation of the rules, institutions, and so on. From this point of view, art's irrelevance can be understood not as a weakness but as a strength, lying in the open, plural contribution it can offer to subjective *Bildung*.³¹ Hence, the reason why Hegel's philosophy of right does not have much to say about art is understandable: a philosophy of right placing too much emphasis on art would disown its own scientific character.³² As far as the relationship between art and right is concerned, it is true that its specificity lies precisely in its un-specificity. Art is only one of the many objects of law that do not require a specific treatment in modernity. Yet such prosaic, seemingly even conservative view of Hegel's is more progressive than that of his opponents (old and new). Consistently with his premises, the primacy of art in its highest capacity (i.e. understood according to the classical paradigm) presupposes the backwardness of ethical-political life. On the contrary, seemingly revolutionary statements and manifestos on the supreme power and universality of art easily turn out to be utopian or regressive when put to the test of reality; just think of the conservative and reactionary tendencies of the late Schelling and the Romantics, as well as some Hegelians.³³ Recourse to the idealized model of the classical polis as based on mythology and art, or even to certain notions from the Catholic Middle Ages, entails an attempt (or temptation) to escape the conflicts and divisions of modernity (i.e. the necessary outcome of the principle of subjective freedom) by virtually removing or actually curbing them.

With Hegel, on the other hand, it is clear that the principle of subjective freedom is incompatible with an artistically founded ethical life. The freedom of the human subject in principle and in its concrete actualization is "sacred" to modern ethical life, but no external thing deserves such recognition. What does not fall under the substantial determinations or characteristics³⁴ of the subject is a mere thing, an object of ownership, contract, or disposal, and, from the formal perspective of right, there is no difference between art and a commodity.³⁵ Although, obviously, the production and enjoyment of art presupposes, among other things, some knowledge of cultural and religious history, the development of "taste" and critical skills, and so on, which are not necessarily needed for commodities, these differences do not essentially impact right, property and contract laws, and so forth. Works of art are originally not external things, but expressions or manifestations of the free spirit that, however, become things through the very activity of the free spirit that produces them:

It may be asked whether the artist, scholar, etc., is from the legal point of view in possession of his art, erudition, ability to preach a sermon, sing a mass, etc., that is, whether such attainments are "things". We may hesitate to call such abilities, attainments, aptitudes, etc.,

“things”, for while possession of these may be the subject of business dealings and contracts, as if they were things, there is also something inward and spiritual about it . . . Attainments, erudition, talents, and so forth, belong, of course, to free spirit and are something internal and not external to it, but even so, by expressing them it may embody them in something external and alienate [*veräußern*] them . . ., and in this way they are put into the category of “things”. Therefore they are not immediate at the start but only acquire this character through the mediation of spirit which reduces its inner possessions to immediacy and externality.

(PhR, 59, transl. modified)

The free spirit transforms determinations it has developed itself (art, religion, science) into something mediated, alienated, and reified. In the case of the work of art, then, spiritual interiority is externalized and so it becomes a thing and a commodity. There is thus a difference between arts and crafts as far as the spiritual degree is concerned, but no qualitative difference as far as their legal status as things is concerned.

Finally, it can be suggested that for Hegel, the state must protect and promote the existence and development of the institutions in charge of art and culture (universities, museums, art academies, theatres, etc.) without exploiting them for ideological propaganda. Here, too, one could measure the distance between Hegel and Schelling or other thinkers of the time.³⁶ The institutionalized form of art serves individual and collective education, but must undergo free individual reflection and examination and not be regarded as a vehicle of a positively handed-down or unquestioned feeling of cultural or national belonging.³⁷ In this respect, Hegel's stated intention, had he become president of the Berlin Academy, to open not only a collection of German art but also one of “*monumenta nationum*” (ÄK, 206) is significant.³⁸ The moving principle of such a collection would not have been that of a political exploitation of art and culture, but that of its free inclusion in a culture that was not to be “national” or, worse, *völkisch* but, at least to some extent, cosmopolitan.

Notes

- 1 To be clear: there are several important studies on art and politics, the political value of art, and so on, in Hegel, such as James 2009; Bird-Pollan, Marchenkov 2020; Olivier, Weisser-Lohmann 2013; Iannelli 2013; I may also refer to Siani 2010b, 2017. However, the specific relation between art and right and between art's past character and the philosophy of right, the issue of art's right, and so on, have rarely been sharply focused upon. In addition to the studies referred to herein, see my comprehensive article Siani 2012b.
- 2 See Chapters 2 and 5.

- 3 See Gethmann-Siefert 2005, 46 ff. On the (difficult) coexistence of the ideal and the historical dimension in art, and, more in general, on art as a product of both the absolute and objective spirit and on the implications for our topic, see Düsing 1981.
- 4 Jaeschke 1982, 180, speaks of a *Sonderfall*, an exception, and this applies to “the form of art in general, including Greek art”.
- 5 See also D’Angelo 1989, 212, who consequently argues for a weakening of the paradigmatic value of the classical in favour of a Hegelian concept of art under the mark of the symbolic and thus of inadequacy and partiality: the classical shows itself rather as “an unrepeatable parenthesis within a paradigm that conceives of art mainly according to the connotations of inadequacy and imbalance, as a felicitous but irrevocably past moment”. See also Kwon 2001, 312.
- 6 As Peters 2015, 127, puts it, “beautiful art therefore fails by its own standards. It purports to present figures that are both beautiful *and* human. However, in being beautiful, these figures fail to be fully human, or fail to actualize the human being’s *telos*, to become a genuine subject or self. On the other hand, if they were closer to what human beings are really destined to be, they would fail to be beautiful”. See in general the whole book by Peters for a clarification of the intrinsic limits of classical beauty.
- 7 Indeed, whenever I speak of modernity in this book, it is this passage that I have in mind. See Siani 2020a, where based on the Hegelian principle, I propose a critical reading of Heidegger (on which, see Chapter 7 of this book).
- 8 There is however not just a rift but some continuity in the “genealogy” of modernity through the religion of art. See in this regard Siani 2013b as well as the previous chapter in this book.
- 9 See Siep 2017, 8–9.
- 10 “Hegel rejects skeptical consequences by pointing out that the right of subjectivity and the right of objectivity – in virtue of the generality of reason – do not normally conflict with each other. For preserving the right of subjectivity it suffices that autonomous subject are in principle able to critically assess given norms and values in case of conflict. . . . The right of objectivity can only be realized permanently – in stable social institutions – if the social world that is given for the individual is rational, so that that the individuals can identify with it. But under the conditions of modernity, as we can read Hegel’s theory of the will, this will only be the case if there emerge social institutions in which we can realize our individual autonomy” (Quante 2010, 228).
- 11 See Quante 2011, chapter 13, and Wood 2017. At the same time, however, it is also true that Hegel does not lay out legal instruments for the purpose of defending individuals against violations of their rights by the state: see, among others, Siep 1982, 272–274.
- 12 On the topic of *Gesinnung*/disposition and its relationship to (the many layers of meaning of) the constitution, see above all Siep 1992.
- 13 The topic of *Bildung*/education is itself controversial in the literature on Hegel. The scholars’ views range from the assertion of the relative irrelevance of education, whose arbitrariness Hegel polemically contrasts with the objectivity of laws and general norms, to the acknowledgement of its central position within the universalisation of subjective sentiment. Here I can only refer, among others, to Pöggeler 1980; Pleines 1986; Kwon 2005a, 2005b. That the Hegelian theory of education is probably more important today than “Hegel could have guessed at the time” is convincingly claimed by Rózsa 2007a, 101.

The discussion of Hegel's theory of action would also belong in this context, because subjective action is the place where education plays its guiding role, yet this topic would take us too far. Reference should be made here above all to the fundamental Quante 1993 and, for an interpretation of the whole philosophy of right as practical philosophy, Weisser-Lohmann 2011.

- 14 See Hegel's rather cynical account of the novel's portrayal of the contrast between the individual's chivalric fantasies and the prosaic callousness of the modern world: "The individual sets forth like a knight and wants to realize the good in the world, realize his ideal of love. He clashes with the solid actuality and the result can only be that the individual does not change the world, but lowers his horns and yields to the objectivity. The end will be that he enters the worldly chaining, acquires family and a position, a wife who, however highly idealized, is a wife not better than most" (ÄH, 197–198).
- 15 See the first chapter of this book. Hegel speaks in this regard of "the aberration which considers art as the absolute way [to express the truth]" (ÄH, 5).
- 16 Hegel "recognized immediately that romantic art was congenial to the spirit of the age – in its subjectivism, the spirit of modernity was expressed. But as a poetry of diremption it was hardly called to be the "schoolmistress of mankind"; it did not lead to the sort of religion of art by which Hegel, together with Hölderlin and Schelling, had sworn in Frankfurt. Philosophy could not subordinate itself to it" (Habermas 1987, 32).
- 17 I will further develop this interpretation of the art of formal subjectivity in the next chapter by contrasting it with Danto's and Pippin's views on art's past character.
- 18 I use this expression in a similar sense to Menke 1996, 11–12: the (necessary) principle of universal and rational justice that corresponds to the universal and autonomous will is not necessarily compatible with individual self-realisation and the desire for authenticity. Although, in my opinion and contrary to Menke's, this does not lead to a return of the tragic pattern in modernity, the incompatibility highlighted by Menke can be seen in terms of the danger of an ever-increasing "soft" and "democratic" homogenisation and normalisation of all authentic particularities.
- 19 The connection between the very framing of the laws, the demand for the protection and development of particularity, and the need for education is laid out, for example, in the *Addition* to § 209 of the *Philosophy of Right*: "It is through the working of the system of particularity that right comes to be externally necessary as protection for particular interests. Even though its source is the concept, right nonetheless only becomes something existent because this is useful for people's needs. To become conscious in thought of his right, one must be trained to think and not remain attached to the merely sensuous. We must invest objects with the form of universality and similarly we must direct our willing according to a universal principle. It is only after human beings have devised numerous needs and after their acquisition has become intertwined, that laws can be framed" (PhR, 198). On the topic of particularity and its practical-political relevance, see also Rózsa 2007b.
- 20 Art can thus act as a means of communication between different cultures and world views, as in the aforesaid case of Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*, on which see A, 610–611.
- 21 See the enlightening observations by Kwon 2001, 308–311.
- 22 "All cultivation [*Zucht*] entails also the moment of negation of this natural way of being" (GPh, 239). See also Pöggeler 1980, Kwon 2001, 297 ff., 2005a, 19 ff.

- 23 The advantage of this reading, which is obviously not a simple restitution of Hegel but can be derived from Hegelian premises, lies above all in the fact that, unlike seemingly comparable theses, it does not imply that art in modernity only has this ability because of a higher claim to truth. Such implication, in my opinion, runs into huge problems: the need for a quasi-deontological separation between “true” or “high” art and mass entertainment art, a certain elitism, an ambivalent overlapping of fictional representation and objective givenness of ethical values and convictions, etc. The view worked out here, on the other hand, is not associated with such deontological claims. Different works of art can make different contributions to education, to critical skills, to the development of individual culture and taste, but they do not, or do not always, *have to*. What is important, in my reading, is that art formally (i.e., not by conveying specific, philosophically or politically pre-determined contents) opens a space where the recipient can virtually come into contact with the most heterogeneous expressions of the *Humanus* and thus expand his horizon. Such expansion, however, is almost completely free: it can mean entertainment as well as active criticism, business as well as an intellectual manifesto, the expression of sheer individual protest as well as compromise, and so on. It is neither the task of philosophy nor, even less, of politics to provide a restrictive regulatory criterion. I will develop these aspects in the next and then in the final chapter. See also Walker 2007.
- 24 “The main mass, the material from which everything is actually formed [*Die Hauptmasse, der Stoff aus dem sich eigentlich alles bildet*], is indeed only sensibility. The well-known result, which only needs to be remembered because it is so often put out of sight, is that the human is a being composed of sensibility and reason” (FS1, 78). That philosophy, at least pragmatically, does not represent a sufficiently general form of human education is also claimed by the mature Hegel: “The general human education [*Die allgemeine Bildung des Menschen*] is first of all the sensible education, and then, second, the meddling of the form of the universal in the sensible appearance, reflection in its beginnings, the incorporation of the universal. . . . Speculative consideration, though, is not the universal form of thought for all humans” (GPh, 257–258). See also Rózsa 2007a, 101: “The human being is human in that he is a thinking being; in this we are all identical. But this abstract thought should also be assigned to the right of concrete subjective consciousness; everyone should be aware of it. Since philosophy cannot make this concept accessible to all, the educational forms of modern society have the task of spreading this ‘infinitely important’ thought”.
- 25 “In order to glimpse the space where the individual with its own irreplaceable function can set itself apart from and stand out in front of the community, one cannot consider the places where Hegel depicts the ethical community as fully developed and realised in its relations. . . . The authentic conflicts that open up the space for the decisive relevance of individual action arise either in the phase of emergence or in the phase of dissolution of the ethical community” (Chiereghin 1995, 299–300).
- 26 See the explicit correlation between heroes and artists in the context of tragedy in PhS, 392: “The hero is himself the speaker, and the performance displays to the audience – who are also spectators – *self-conscious* human beings who *know* their rights and purposes, the power and the will of their specific nature and know how to *assert* them. They are artists, who do not express with unconscious naturalness and naivety the *external* aspect of their resolves and

- enterprises, as happens in the language accompanying ordinary actions in actual life; on the contrary, they give utterance to the inner essence, they prove the rightness of their action, and the 'pathos' which moves them is soberly asserted and definitely expressed in its universal individuality, free from the accidents of circumstance and personal idiosyncrasies". For an overview of the connection between Hegel's concept of action/agency and his aesthetics, see, to begin with, Wiehl 1971; Speight 2009. I will say something more about this issue in Chapter 5.
- 27 See also Siani 2019a.
 - 28 Just think of the issue, mentioned in the first chapter, of poverty in general and the creation of "rabble" in particular, with the attendant implications (see PhR, 221), which, for Avineri 1972, 148, is "the only problem which remains open and unresolved according to Hegel's own admission" in his theory of modern society. See also Schmidt am Busch 2002, 145 ff.
 - 29 Also for an overview of the development of Hegel's views in this regard, see Weisser-Lohmann 2005b.
 - 30 See Rózsa 2007c.
 - 31 The great interest that Hegel has in religion as opposed to art in political terms could then also be interpreted the other way round, namely in the sense of a higher freedom and usefulness of art as a model for the formal, indirect education of the individual into a modern citizen. I sketched this idea in Siani 2013c.
 - 32 "At first glance, this seems like an undeserved restriction and consignment of art to irrelevance. And yet it is anything but that. . . . One must take the restraints of the philosophy of right seriously: the state cannot claim a right to certain forms of education through art. . . . [Hegel's] conception does not condemn art to irrelevance in the modern state, but leaves to it the freedom of content and effect" (Gethmann-Siefert 1992, 226–227).
 - 33 See also Gethmann-Siefert 1986, 77.
 - 34 "Therefore those goods, or rather substantial characteristics, which constitute my very own person and the universal essence of my self-consciousness are inalienable and my right to them is imprescriptible. Such characteristics are my personality as such, my universal freedom of will, my ethical life, my religion" (PhR, 77).
 - 35 "Spiritual [*geistig*] aptitudes, erudition, artistic skill, even things ecclesiastical . . . inventions, and so forth, become subjects of a contract, brought to parity, through being bought and sold, with things recognized as things" (PhR, 58–59, transl. modified).
 - 36 On this topic, and more generally on the relationships among political and cultural, educational, and artistic institutions in the philosophy of German idealism and in its historical context, see, among others, Sziborsky 1986; Lübke 1983; Scholtz 1996.
 - 37 One could also speak of their "character of proposal" (Gethmann-Siefert 1986, 102).
 - 38 See Pöggeler 1986, 7 ff., and Kwon 2001, 313 ff.

4 Futures of Art

Hegel, Danto, Pippin

The previous two chapters have reclaimed the philosophical soundness and centrality of the thesis of art's past character by setting it in the context of Hegel's view of modernity from the double perspective of religion and right/politics. The arguments developed up to this point will now be further refined from a more strictly aesthetic perspective and then put to the test by contrasting them with two rather different and extremely influential interpretations of Hegel's thesis of art's past character, namely Danto's and Pippin's. In doing so, on the one hand, I aim to better develop the specific potential contribution that Hegel can offer to the reflection on post-Hegelian art, and on the other hand, to criticize Danto's and Pippin's readings for being, despite their many merits, insufficiently radical in framing such potential contribution in Hegelian terms. The chapter will thus try to go beyond Hegel using Hegelian resources, whereas – or so I claim – two of the most important progressive readings of the end of art do not unleash the whole Hegelian potential while dealing with post-Hegelian art, resulting instead in impoverishment and stereotyping. The chapter is structured as follows: the first, Hegel-immanent part will contrast the tripartition of romantic art into the “religious circle”, the “mundane circle”, and the “formalism of subjectivity” with the paradigm of the classical, and then will try to go beyond the latter. I will show that, while the first two stages of the romantic present substantial similarities to classical art, the “formalism of subjectivity” calls for a completely new and specific pattern, which, if effectively freed from the burden of the reference to the classical one, may offer a rather attractive Hegelian standpoint on post-Hegelian art (1). I will then further qualify such standpoint with reference to the historical, and not only artistic, figure of the formalism of subjectivity (2), before contrasting my reading with the interpretations by Danto (3) and Pippin (4).

The Last of the Romantic

It should be clear, based on the previous chapters, that any attempt at actualizing Hegel's standpoint for post-Hegelian art should be wary of direct,

literal appropriations. We need to carefully spell out what we are looking for and where we are looking for it, as the subject at the centre of our investigation here is, at best, marginal for Hegel. We need to be constantly aware that we will not find much about our topic directly in Hegel's text, so we will have to read between the lines or even go against the grain. This is a crucial precaution here: if instead we proceed by simply gathering direct clues from Hegel's text, we will end up following *his* standpoint and goal, which might be as marginal to ours as the contrary is the case. Our topic here is: what can Hegel's aesthetics say about art after the completion of its absolute work, that is, how can we "positively" and constructively interpret the art of the formalism of subjectivity in order to build a bridge towards art in our own time? Although it would be unfair and naïve to expect Hegel's aesthetics to provide a detailed explanation of the essence of art as it is to us today, it seems equally unfair to demean the Hegelian contribution to a mere negative characterization. It makes more sense to try and gain some basic features of a positive theory from and within such negative characterization. Let us go back then, one last time, to Hegel's tripartition of the universal art forms. Such tripartition revolves around the discourse on art as a part of the encyclopaedic system, that is, as a form of absolute spirit. This leads to classical art, as the perfect and unsurpassable expression of the divine in the form of the work of art, standing in the foreground and acting as the paradigm of art as such. Symbolic and romantic art, instead, end up looking like huge generic containers of immensely different artistic periods, types, and works that cannot simply be subsumed under a common denominator, other than that of being "non-ideal". If, instead, we take the lectures on aesthetics, there Hegel deals intensively with all three forms of art. The constant changes and updates across the various lectures and years make it clear that symbolic and romantic art are by no means to be understood merely as the *ante* and the *post* of classical art but go through a complex theoretical and historical unfolding that requires an independent, non-classicist approach,¹ which however is not systematically fleshed out by Hegel. The challenge, then, is to "carve out" the outlines of a systematization (or re-systematization) of a relatively under-systematized part of Hegel's aesthetics, without contradicting Hegel's words while also trying to go beyond them, that is, sharpening the "regional" systematic principle beyond Hegel's own orientation.

The common principle of romantic art in its three moments or stages (the "religious circle", the "mundane circle", and the "formalism of subjectivity") is, as we saw, the fact that the divine no longer lives in the externality of the work of art but in the inwardness and subjectivity of the pure spirit. Nevertheless, only the first two stages are romantic art in the truest sense of the word, as "the romantic world . . . had only one absolute work, the spread of Christianity" (ÄH, 196), which is precisely what the first

two stages accomplish, up to the point where no further accomplishment is possible through art. Historically, the *terminus post quem* is the Reformation, “certifying” the completion of art’s contribution to the absolute work of the romantic world. All that is left to art is the account of random adventures, in which the seriousness of the “knightly” task of Christian “mundane” art stands in ridiculous contrast to the void left by its completion. The exemplary figure here is Don Quixote, which thus forms “the conclusion of the romantic” (ÄH, 197). But if the romantic is concluded, what happens to art after *Don Quixote*? Is the formalism of subjectivity still properly art, or an intruder? The conclusion seems inevitable: the third circle of romantic art, which not coincidentally is indeed not even a circle (unlike the first two ones), has independence and unity only insofar as it embodies not only the end of the romantic art but also the end of art in general. After the completion of its absolute work and with its extreme subjectivization, art “falls apart [*auseinander fällt*]” (ÄK, 153).²

If this was the whole story, we could not expect much in terms of a Hegelian standpoint on post-Hegelian art. There are some indications, however, that we cannot be satisfied with this conclusion. After all, with reference to German art in particular striving “to attain an immanent of its own” (ÄH, 200), Hegel himself claims that this is “the end of romantic art, which is otherwise the beginning” (ÄH, 200). The end is thus also a beginning: in the third moment, romantic art is already over, and something new, which is actually no longer romantic art proper, begins. The end of romantic art is connected to a new beginning. From this point of view, it seems that the first two stages of romantic art are more similar to classical art, with which they share the accomplishment of an “absolute work”,³ than to the third stage of romantic art. Such absolute work is the groundwork based on which all forms of art, from the symbolic to the mundane circle, are to be understood. Hegel says this explicitly, as he juxtaposes the “relationship of the art of our time” (ÄH, 202) to every art before it, which “had as its basis the unity of concept and reality [and] its interest [was] to represent the substantial manner of the consciousness of a people” (ÄH, 202–203).

What does this tell us about “the art of our time”? What should be obvious is that, in pursuing this question, we should try to adopt the standpoint of the formalism of subjectivity as something *radically* different from all of the previous paradigm, that is, from all that was at the core of Hegel’s interest and knowledge.⁴ Hegel himself was unable to or uninterested in performing this radical shift of perspective, because he also grasps the art of formal subjectivity from the perspective of the realization of an absolute work, hence only in negative terms as the absence of the latter, and must coherently speak only of the disintegration of art, without outlining a positive theory. This has to do also with his argument against that part of Romanticism that still claimed precisely this: art’s ability to produce

an absolute work. We can, however, integrate and “update” the Hegelian statement by assuming that the art of our time no longer has anything to do with this task, and try to turn such mere absence into the outline of a positive perspective. Since art is now to be understood as the pure expression of formal subjectivity, we must ask ourselves two main questions, the answers to which can lead us towards our goal: (1) What subjectivity does Hegel describe as “formal”, and can such term also be given a positive meaning?, and (2) In what sense is art a medium to express such subjectivity, and on what conditions is such expression itself positive?

What Is “Formal Subjectivity”? What Is Its Art?

Formal subjectivity is not just the last stage in the history of art, but in the history of the world as a whole, that is, the last stage in the period going under the heading of “The Enlightenment and the Revolution” in Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of history (PhG, 520 ff.). Here, formal subjectivity, formal freedom, formal will are just different facets of one and the same way of relating of the individual to the universal. Briefly, subjectivity is merely formal when it wants to assert its own particularity as such (i.e. formally) as the essence of subjective freedom, that is, of the very principle of modernity. If I acknowledge only my particular individuality as the basis of my will and my action, then my subjectivity is formal. According to Hegel, this is the principle of liberalism and atomism, which finds its philosophical expression in Kant and its political expression in the French Revolution (see PhG, 525–529), thus confirming that, also from this angle, Kant’s philosophy, the French Revolution, and the diagnosis of the tensions of modernity, from which we took our cues in chapter 1, are joined together by Hegel in a way that is extremely relevant to the topic of art’s past character. The general sense of formal subjectivity is therefore that of a standpoint that is formally independent of objectivity. The word “formal” means very little and very much at the same time. Very little, because here the subject is only “form”, potential without content and concreteness: the weak unity of a stream of random images. Very much, because it contains the possibility of severe detachment from reality. The weakness of the merely formal and the supposed strength of a self-asserting subjectivity are expressions of one and the same one-sidedness, which can lead to nihilism. However, there is also the possibility of a positive and constructive integration of subjectivity into the objective, which does not repress its difference but accepts it as the dialectical foundation of the progress of consciousness and freedom. This is indeed “the collision, the knot, the problem, where history stands and which it has to solve in the future” (PhG, 535).⁵

Clearly, formal subjectivity does not denote an aesthetic category or an art period or even form. It is, instead, a broadly framed configuration of

subjectivity in modern times. In ancient times, or even before the Reformation, the emergence of such a figure was not even imaginable. Indeed, modernity in the strictest sense is characterized, among other things, by this emergence, which is nothing but a historically necessary, though negative, moment in the affirmation of the principle of subjective freedom. It is, as a matter of fact, the figure (or a figure) of the radical instability inherent – though often dormant – in modernity: the highest right of the subject, which is constitutive for modernity, leads, if taken only formally or abstractly, to the obliteration of all substantial, common ethical life, that is, to the extreme consequences of that alienation and individualism which are, *per se*, typical of modernity. The always-lurking possibility of atomization instills not only in ethical life but also in the subject itself, an inescapable feeling of fragmentation, disorientation, and loss. Formal subjectivity is hence a figure of the Hegelian diagnosis of that “malaise of modernity” from which we started, as well as of the philosophical therapy aiming at reconciling such instability.⁶ Finding a therapy means first of all providing justification of the objective ethical content and motivation to that always-at-risk subjectivity, and to do so in an adequate form, which is no longer aesthetic but conceptual. Just like the principle of subjective freedom in general, formal subjectivity too establishes several corresponding configurations at all levels, including, of course, art. When dealing with the art of formal subjectivity, we may then follow Hegel’s main concern, which is directed to conciliatory and substantial versions of this form of art (e.g., “objective humour”), along the – by now unreachable – classical pattern. Or, we can leave that aside, as we are doing in this chapter, and reflect on formal subjectivity in art as a shape of reality in its own right, releasing it from the classical pattern that is still reflected in the Hegelian struggle for reconciliation and substantiation.

That only a highly “subjectivised” art form can match the figure of formal subjectivity, while art along the lines of the classical pattern has its purpose in objectively carrying out an “absolute work”, is almost a tautology. The classical pattern entails a more or less complete and immediate identification of the subject and the object and the attendant intertwining of concept and reality. This cannot be the case for an art that expresses the existence and right of formal subjectivity. Giving this expression an appearance of objectivity and universality is in fact deceptive and potentially dangerous, because subjectivity can find support in its assumed absoluteness, with anachronistic or outright nihilistic outcomes.⁷ We should, instead, think of art forms that retain an aspiration to formal subjectivity, while detaching it from the call for an absolute work. The *raison d’être* of such art is its new ability to give a formal, yet “positive”, constructive expression to the critical distancing of the subject from reality. Herein stands the point of connection between the historical figure of the formal subjectivity and that

of the art of the formalism of subjectivity, which gives both terms a positive connotation relevant to both aesthetics and practical philosophy, on condition, however, that both terms renounce absoluteness. In other words, the possibility of a new objectivity for the art of formal subjectivity as such can be found here, provided one carefully disentangles such aim from Hegel's leading orientation. An art that is adequate to the historical possibility of the formalism of subjectivity must truly look beyond the classical, absolute pattern of reconciliation and unity and turn to the particular subject as such, which means, also, that it must be a subject-driven configuration of particular subjectivity, and not an absolute-driven one. In this way, and only in this way, art can abstain from contributing to a structurally nihilistic subjectivity and from proposing obsolete harmony-driven patterns. Let us now spell out the characteristics of such "new art".

The art of the formalism of subjectivity is the formal expression, that is, independent of the respective contents, of the detachment and distancing of the individual from reality, or, put otherwise, of the essential non-identity (and non-identifiability) of the two terms. This only applies to this form of art, as all the previous forms were exactly the opposite, namely "the unity of concept and reality [as] the concept of art itself" (ÄH, 202). In the art of the formalism of subjectivity, the whole spectrum of possible manifestations of human particularity unfolds as non-unitary or non-harmonious. Here, in fiction, the whole power of that formal freedom comes out as a detachment from objective reality.⁸ The subject here is only the particular subject, which by its nature eludes universalization and conceptual unity. To the extent that every work of art reproduces a fragment of the unattainable unity of this subject, through art we have a virtually infinite set of appearances of a content that cannot find expression in a unified picture. The art of the formalism of subjectivity is thus not a foreign body in the fabric of modernity, but is deeply settled in it. This settlement is ambiguous, however, as it depends on the absolute significance we ascribe to the art form as such. If we assume that art still has an absolute work to fulfil, then for such art and for the type of subjectivity it expresses, reality becomes a foreigner or even an enemy. This is because, on the conditions of the modern world, art's performance of an absolute work is bound to fail. The artwork is significant as a fragment or a tile of a whole, not as an attempt at reinstating totality and universality through a single image, or performing an absolute work, however conceived. The latter proviso applies to the very "principle" of this art as well: in other terms, not even the fundamental instability and fragmentation of modernity, with the attending figure of formal subjectivity, can be univocally and universally portrayed in an artwork aiming at its reconciliation.⁹ Art as such can provide a transient, partial, fragmentary form of reconciliation,¹⁰ but only philosophy and discursive argumentation provide the ground for

a more unified, broader-ranging, “binding” one, which however does not and cannot replace the inclination for the individual case that is peculiar to the artistic one.

In the end: if we relinquish the assumption of the art of our time as something to be measured according to the criteria of classical art, as well as of the first two stages of romantic art, then we have an art which plays a completely different role and arises from entirely different motives and needs. Such art can be called “art” only by analogy, without implying any conceptual unity, as it has just become impossible for any conceptual unity to take any aesthetic form. In fact, this new art form, coherently with the Hegelian premises, stands for the division of concept and reality rather than for their unification, as well as for the formal discrepancy between the particular subject and the existing reality, that is, for the *not feeling* at home hinted at the end of Chapter 2. But it is precisely the artist’s impossibility to effectively interpret and communicate the “objective” spirit as the content of his work that turns out to be a good interpretation of the context of this new art, that is, we may say, of our age.¹¹ One can therefore argue that it is precisely the disintegration of art and the break-up of the relationship between the artist and objectivity that lays out the prospect of a new, however weak, fragmented and non-absolute, role and *raison d’être* of art which is entirely appropriate to our time. Modern ethical life with all the attending cultural needs, expectations, and so on, is not compact but polycentric and even split and in need for mediation. For this reason, it is impossible for a work of art to objectively represent the whole picture: we need to see art as partial. Every work of art reproduces only a fragment or a perspective: all these fragments can be put together through reflective mediation, but even within the latter, they are only significant and effective insofar as they are considered fragments and not attempts at offering a unified picture of the world.

In the second half of this chapter, I will further substantiate this reading and its implications by critically contrasting it with two different ways of framing the problem of a post-Hegelian art using Hegelian means, that of Danto and that of Pippin. As I will try to show, the main issue with both Danto’s and Pippin’s reappraisals of Hegel’s thesis, apart from their undeniable influences and merits, is that they do not take seriously enough the systematic and historical rift that takes place at the third stage of romantic art and the potential of the art of formalism of subjectivity as such. While both massively engage with post-Hegelian art, with a specific focus on modernism and, in the case of Danto, also on pop art, it may be said that, as they do so, they are still under the assumption, however updated and refined, that art systematically adheres to something similar to the Hegelian paradigm of classical art, that is, looking for what Hegel was actually interested in and then trying to reframe it in “our” terms, rather

than looking for what we are interested in within Hegel, aware that it was marginal for him.

Danto's Post-metaphysical Hegelianism

Danto enthusiastically embraces the thesis of the end of art, so much so as to proclaim himself a “born-again Hegelian”.¹² The reworking and appropriation of Hegel’s thesis, though going through several shifts across Danto’s production, takes a central place throughout it and is, as a matter of fact, the best-known and most influential feature in Danto’s philosophy. Here, I will not clearly be able to do full justice to it, as my main aim is instead to strengthen the distinctive reasons of Hegel’s own version of the thesis. Therefore, I will mostly focus on Danto’s departure from Hegel and will critically discuss it.¹³ In its most comprehensive and dramatic sense, the end of art is taken by Danto to mean the accomplishment of art’s investigation of its own meaning and nature, and the handover of any “essential” investigation to philosophy. According to Danto’s narrative, pop art puts an end to modernist art’s constantly frustrated, though productive, self-questioning of the essence of art. With Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, the philosophical direction of art reaches its peak and, with it, its end. The *Brillo Boxes* show that art cannot answer the question about the essence of art, the artwork being as such indiscernible from its non-artistic counterpart and needing something different from art, that is, philosophical reflection, to be understood.

The essential question is therefore handed over to philosophy, and the history of art is concluded: “The historical stage of art is done with when it is known what art is and means. The artists have made the way open for philosophy, and the moment has arrived at which the task must be transferred finally into the hands of philosophers”.¹⁴ From this, Danto concludes that “art-makers, living in . . . the post-historical period of art, will bring into existence works which lack the historical importance or meaning we have for a long time come to expect”.¹⁵ Without a historical direction or progress left to art, the very idea of direction is lost: art is completely relieved of its essential task, and any task becomes as good as any. This does not mean, per se, that every work is as good as any, nor that anything can be art. Artworks can still be criticized, as Danto’s long and impressive career as a critic shows, and artworks are different from non-artistic objects as a result of their being “embodied meanings”.¹⁶ Danto embraces a radical pluralism, but not, at least directly, relativism,¹⁷ which he attributes to Hegel, instead. Moreover, he does not believe that we have “outgrown art”, a belief that he openly attributes to Hegel’s contemptuous and “invidious view” of art.¹⁸ Danto’s Hegelianism is, we might say, a “simplified” or

“selective” one. Danto is indeed indebted to Hegel as far as his own core ideas are concerned, but he tries to disentangle them from what he sees as an untenable, obsolete metaphysical frame, conducive to unpopular or outlandish implications, like the ones we have just seen. However, in my opinion, not only his view of Hegel turns from simplified to simplistic, but also, more importantly, he takes a “compensatory” attitude, to the extent that the unwanted implications of Hegel’s thesis are easier to dismiss in Hegel than in Danto himself, at least in the spirit if not in the letter. Let me substantiate such criticism in terms of the two core “metaphysical” dualisms that Danto attributes to Hegel, but that reflect, instead, Danto’s own view in an even stronger and irredeemable way.¹⁹

The first point is Danto’s starkly dualistic reading of the rift between historical and post-historical art following the end of art in Hegel. The separation of art and philosophy implies art’s losing all ability to embody and express meanings that are important and not just ancillary to human beings: in his account of Hegel, only subservient, decorative art is left, and no free art.²⁰ If in Hegel the only options are the classical paradigm or subservient art, then of course “interesting” demands on art can only be raised by the former, whereas everything goes in the latter, where we simply outgrow art as such. Hence Hegel’s full-blown relativism and complete dismissal of any need for art, which remains, at most, as a “luxury”.²¹ However, things are fairly more complex in Hegel. For Hegel, free art is precisely beautiful art (as equivalent to “fine art”): not as opposed to ugly or other aesthetic predicates, but as opposed to a merely utilitarian, decorative or subservient art.²² The latter is not even worth of critique in Hegel’s philosophy of art: it simply lies outside the possibility of philosophical consideration, *unlike*, as we saw, the art for which Hegel envisages a space, however limited or negative, after the end of art.²³ Between art as an adequate form of absolute spirit (i.e. based on the classical pattern) and mere ornaments, Hegel himself, as we saw, offers some clues to define a space for an art that can no longer fulfil our highest needs, but is still the expression of some very serious needs. In Houlgate’s words, Hegel’s thesis does not imply,

as Danto claims, that Hegel believes art in the future will be no more than a “luxury”. . . . The fact that art ceases to be our highest need does not mean that it ceases to be a need altogether. Art will never again meet the *highest* needs of humanity (unless we regress to the level of the Greeks); but it can continue to meet our real and enduring *need* for aesthetic self-understanding by exploring the richness of human life and freedom, and it can continue thereby to fulfil the intrinsic function of art by being beautiful.²⁴

For Hegel, art that does not fall under the classical archetype can still be beautiful and, as such, free,²⁵ though of course in a substantially different way from classical art.

The permanence of such a space is, if anything, more dubious in Danto himself. Consider, for example, the conclusion of the sentence quoted earlier, about “the historical importance or meaning [of art] we have for a long time come to expect”. Here, the discourse is framed, again, in stark dualism: either there is such importance or there is not. Either we have art with a historical direction, or we have post-historical art. Danto’s view of the latter, despite his pluralistic and progressive intention, cannot but give the impression of a certain nostalgic conservatism: we are in a post-historical time, in which we still “expect” art to have an importance and meaning to which we can only refer negatively, that is, by asserting it lacking, and not in a positive, constructive way. Consider the famous challenging conclusion of “the End of Art” chapter in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*:

The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply. Decoration, self-expression, entertainment are, of course, abiding human needs. There will always be a service for art to perform, if artists are content with that. Freedom ends in its own fulfilment.²⁶

Defiant though these lines might be, it is hard, based on the views I have been presenting, not to associate their philosophical core with Danto’s actual concept, rather than with Hegel. If that is the case, one can hardly abstain from concluding that Danto’s projection on Hegel of the view that we have outgrown art and of uninhibited relativism has a compensatory, apotropaic function.

The dualism of art vs philosophy or historical vs post-historical art is linked to a second dualism which Danto attributes to Hegel: that of matter and content, or reality and concept. Hegel, in Danto’s view, shows a typically idealistic contempt for matter which keeps his aesthetics “hostage to his metaphysics”.²⁷ Art history follows the pattern of the *Bildungsroman* told in the *Phenomenology*, whose “hero” is not art itself, but a purely spiritual entity, which, having gone through a number of “mistaken identities”, attains a final self-knowledge (absolute knowing) to which art is no longer remotely relevant.²⁸ Only “theory” is left at the end, and art, whose only function was to lead to its own philosophy and eventually be subsumed into it, becomes “vaporized”.²⁹ Of course, Danto explicitly rejects such view of knowledge as “fatally flawed”.³⁰ Once again, however, I believe here we have a compensatory strawman. Danto, despite his

“post-metaphysical”³¹ intention, does not refrain from defending his essentialist view of artworks as “embodied meanings” through a metaphysical reductionism that is openly “contemptuous” of aesthetics, excluded as such from the concept of art and, more specifically, from the end of art discourse. He openly claims such exclusion: “As I see it, Duchamp was endeavouring to exclude aesthetics from the concept of art, and, as I think he was successful in this, I have followed his lead”.³² Here, “aesthetics” is not meant to refer to general sensibility, but “to appreciative responses to beauty”.³³ Danto excludes aesthetics thus conceived, because, consistently with his analytic background,³⁴ he thinks it covers issues that are too subjective and contingent to be philosophically meaningful. He considers Duchamp’s *Readymades* successful precisely because they are “beyond good and bad taste”,³⁵ that is, they marginalize those dimensions of the artwork, fully exploiting its philosophical potential. The problem with this is, I believe, not so much the questionable yet explicit strategy of excluding matters of taste from the consideration and definition of artworks.³⁶ The real issue is less explicit, yet more far-reaching, that is, the adoption of such a rigid essentialist³⁷ dualism between the aesthetic dimensions and the philosophical core that the former can “successfully” be removed to make the latter sharper and fully prominent. Such a view only makes sense if one takes the aesthetic dimension to be a contingent external wrap around the truly relevant, non-aesthetic core.

Here, Danto’s view seems to me to be remarkably more “contemptuous” and more of a hostage to (analytic) metaphysics than Hegel’s own view of the artwork as a sensible presence of the idea (see, e.g., E, 259). Artistic contents, in Hegel, are not philosophical contents that can take an artistic form as well,³⁸ as form and content determine each other. Let us just recall Hegel’s clear statement about the ideal case of classical art and the contents it embodies:

It was not as if these ideas and doctrines were already there, *in advance* of poetry, in an abstract mode of consciousness as general religious propositions and categories of thought, and then later were only clothed in imagery by artists and given an external adornment in poetry; on the contrary, the mode of artistic production was such that what fermented in these poets they could work out *only* in this form of art and poetry.

(A, 102)

Clearly, this is the perfect, unrepeatable case of classical art, and one may consider, for example, a large part of Christian art as fulfilling, instead, not an independent, but an ancillary and didactic task, giving an aesthetic shape to pre-existing religious propositions. Admittedly, this may be said of the first two circles of romantic art, as we saw. Yet, regarding the

relationship between art and the aesthetic dimension, Hegel's view is more complex. Even in a no-longer ideal art, the aesthetic dimension is essential and non-dispensable because it frames our experience in a certain way. Aesthetics is not just the domain of contingent material forms, or, worse, of the mere individual appreciation of beauty, but a complex pattern of our experience, keeping together, apart from those dimensions, sensible knowledge, subjective representations, images, feelings, projections, and memories, too. In Hegel's words,

Art not only needs, for the intuitions to be produced by it, an external given material, which includes subjective images and representations. It also needs, for the expression of spiritual content, the given forms of nature together with their meaning, which art must discern and appropriate.

(E, 259)

Thus, even in Duchamp's "anaesthetic" case, the artwork would make little sense if we did not approach it with a wealth of sensible knowledge, expectations, projections, images, even sensory evaluations, that are structurally aesthetic. Indeed, no philosophical meaning would be left of it if we abstracted from "aesthetics" in this broad sense. The object may "approach zero" and even become "vaporized",³⁹ but this tendency to zero and this vapour are relevant to art because they are aesthetic. As such they are still potentially meaningful as an exploration of human contents through the distinctive medium of art, a no longer fully adequate medium for the highest contents, but one that is still capable – precisely because of such past character – of thematizing that "approach" and that "vaporization" in ways that are relevant to us. Once again, if we deny this, I do not see how art after the end of art can be anything but subservient and irrelevant and unfree. The domain of aesthetics conceived in such a broad, complex way, which is Hegelian⁴⁰ and not Dantian, might not fulfil Danto's essentialist criteria of philosophical universality, but it just cannot be reduced to the bare individual appreciation or pleasant indulgence we associate with craftsmanship and subservient art.

The way to claim a space for "free" art in its past condition is, as I tried to argue, by insisting on art's pastness and partiality, that is, by fully disengaging the paradigm of art from the classical one and taking Hegel's idea of an art of formal subjectivity seriously. Hegel himself gives us the possibility, admittedly mostly by working against the grain of his text, to outline the new space of art in a positive and constructive way, as its emancipation from the feasibility (and desirability) of an "absolute work" and a turn towards the "beautiful" of the *Humanus*. Art's liberation as hinted at by Hegel can indeed take itself a purely negative form, as we saw earlier, but

such a negative contains its own positive, which I tried to put together. The same does not seem to apply to Danto's binary opposition. Art's liberation as proclaimed by Danto is instead the obliteration of any real interest attached to it: it is, to paraphrase Hegel, not even the freedom of a child, but that of a stone.⁴¹ Developing the Hegelian option also helps us avoid the radically relativistic outcome. Framing a space where art can still be free and significant even though it is past requires at least some coordinates or orientations,⁴² that is, something similar to that (historical) "direction" that Danto denies to art in the age of pluralism. Clearly, we will not be able to define *a* historical Direction with a capital D, but at least we can look for a plurality of non-capital, yet nonetheless real, ones. Framing such a space allows us to preserve a serious value not only for art but also for the philosophy of art, which of course would no longer make much sense if faced with an "everything-goes" view of art, depleted of any art-specific, not purely subservient, interest.

Pippin's End of Art as End of History

Unlike, or even contrary to, Danto, Pippin can be said to adopt a throughout Hegelian standpoint, with the exception of the very thesis of art's past character, which for him is wrong both about art and about modernity.⁴³ Modernity has not achieved a steady rational state, and art still expresses our highest spiritual needs. At the same time, Pippin maintains that Hegel's aesthetics, if effectively detached from its most burdensome thesis, can still substantially help us deal with art "after the beautiful" as a non-disposable sensuous vehicle of the actualization and intelligibility of those needs. I want to point out from the beginning that I take Pippin's own account of art after the beautiful to be enlightening. Though my concerns are not the same as Pippin's (I am not interested in the issue of modernist painting *per se*, to begin with) and hence the routes I follow in this book are different, I largely agree with him, and my points can hopefully be taken to be complementary to his own. Where I disagree is about his rigid, conservative interpretation of the thesis in Hegel, which, as in Danto's case, though for different reasons, does not take seriously enough the meaning and the potential of the art of the formalism of subjectivity.

As for Pippin's criticism of Hegel's view of modernity, it seems to broadly follow an "end of history" pattern, not to defend it, but to dismiss it. Accordingly, Hegel's "greatest failure"⁴⁴ is his triumphalism about the fully deployed and actualized rationality of our modern time, to which no substantial challenges or tasks are left, not only for art but even for philosophy and politics, a view that, as Pippin remarks, does not need to be proven wrong.⁴⁵ In my opinion, readings of Hegel's view of modernity in terms of an actually, empirically given end of history are fundamentally flawed,

whether affirmative or critical.⁴⁶ First of all, the two levels of empirical/historical action (both individual and collective) and of its philosophical reading need to be kept well apart and not mixed with each other.⁴⁷ For Hegel, rationality plays but a little role in actual human decisions and actions, including modern ones. Rationality finds its place in the world and enables us to interpret it beyond the heteronomy and heterogeneity or even the irrationality of human behaviour and in fact only by “exploiting” them (what Hegel calls *List der Vernunft*, or “cunning of reason”).⁴⁸ The political claim to the right of subjective freedom and the corresponding philosophical transition from substance to subject already announced in the *Phenomenology* are only actualized in a process of coming-to-be, and never in a fixed form, which would imply a return to a static substantialist notion and the inhibition of the power of subjectivity.⁴⁹ Scientific philosophical knowledge does not imply the end of history in the sense of a final, irrevocable triumph of certain objective forms and institutions, but rather the end of history’s subjection to transcendent, not fully knowable or accountable forces. The result is not the simple removal of contingency and differences in reality: “The power of Spirit lies rather in remaining the self-same Spirit in its externalization [*Entäußerung*], and “knowing is this seeming inactivity which merely contemplates how what is differentiated spontaneously moves in its own self and returns into its unity” (PhS, 490). The subject is able to reconcile necessity and contingency by finding himself in otherness, that is, by being free: the reconciliation is now immanent and not transcendent, always partially actual and not postponed to another world.

Even the achievement of absolute knowing and, with it, of the end of philosophy as announced and carried out by the *Phenomenology*⁵⁰ does not have its counterpart in the absolute triumph of certain empirical forms, but rather in the opening of a truly human history, that is, historical-political-social-ethical forms as the product of the freedom of the subject. At the same time, as we saw, philosophy as actual knowing provides us with the insight that subjective freedom is not opposed to, but is in fact only actualized through its becoming objective, and with the tools to criticize both the subjective and the objective forms that hinder the freedom thus conceived. No given “objective” shape is “absolute” (and one should take Hegel’s distinction between the two levels of the spirit seriously: the objective is never absolute⁵¹). The change of paradigm of modernity, lying in grasping and expressing the substance always also as a subject, is not accomplished once and for all together with the announcement and philosophical proof of its necessity. The latter makes up only the first stage of the new form of the world: its actuality consists in its embodiments or shapes, which however are not a philosophical product, but the playground of human agency.⁵² When we speak of reconciled modernity, then, we must specify that this

does not point to an empirical state of affairs in our modern condition, but to the philosophically founded and subjectively knowable elimination of a dualistic transcendence that fundamentally hinders such reconciliation. Gaining such certainty, with the attending feelings of disenchantment rather than triumphalism, has, if anything, *increased* our sense of conflict, disorientation, and instability, which by now no call for transcendence, whether historical/artistic (the ideal pattern of classical Greece or the Catholic Middle Ages) or religious (a just otherworldly reality guaranteed by an omnipotent God), can reconcile.⁵³

Pippin's criticism of the thesis of art's past character follows from there, and so does my rejoinder. Precisely because modernity is not a fully reconciled rational condition, but a structurally precarious, non-harmonic, alienated one, art cannot be its counterpart in the fulfilment of our highest needs. In fact, art was and could be an adequate form of absolute spirit precisely in the state of ethical compactness and harmony (however fragile) of the classical Greek ethical life.⁵⁴ And yet from here it does not follow that the systematic and historical primacy of philosophy as actual knowing in our times implies the triumph of a hyper-rationalistic determination of all aspects, or even just some decisive ones, of the modern world with the aim of reconciliation. Instead, we may characterize the reconciliatory task of philosophy as actual knowing in terms of an endless task of controlling and "guaranteeing" the actualization of subjective freedom in and through objective forms. The principle of subjectivity remains actual only through the power to negate and reframe its own objective embodiments, not through the historical-empirical givenness of any of those embodiments, which, taken separately, are subjected to contingency.⁵⁵ This is where, despite their generally shared content and task, philosophy as actual knowing departs from the previous two forms of absolute spirit: both art and revealed religion are structurally tied to an empirically given material, which, to different extents, determines shapes and poses constraints on the human subject.

However, I would like to dispel the impression that, in order to criticize Pippin's view of Hegel's self-satisfied philosophical modernism, I may have been caught in the other extreme, that is, a view of philosophy as a tool aimed at constantly dissolving objective contents and values, and, correspondingly, of subjectivity as a nihilist power constantly working at destroying and reconfiguring objectivity. This is clearly not the case in Hegel: the subjectivity Hegel has in mind is and has to be concretized and embedded in the objective and cultural institutions of its time. The point is that those institutions can now be understood as a product of subjective freedom, and actuality is therefore at least potentially reconciled with human subjectivity. It would therefore be contradictory for subjectivity to constantly destroy its own embodiments in order to assert its freedom.

For a time-appropriate subjectivity, this can only be the case when those embodiments *cannot* be rationally reconstructed as its own products, that is, when they are structurally threatening the principle of subjective freedom. In this regard, philosophy as actual knowing seems to follow a pragmatist or, more precisely, a “default and challenge model”.⁵⁶ Subjective forms or attitudes nihilistically or narcissistically aiming for the pure destruction of objectivity *qua* objectivity are just as much the target of philosophical critique as are the freedom-impairing objective forms, as aptly shown by Hegel’s treatment of Romantic irony, the beautiful soul, abstract formalism, and so on, both in the *Phenomenology* and in the *Philosophy of Right*. As clearly shown by the discussion of the art of formal subjectivity, it is art, rather than philosophy, that risks taking such subjectivist drift.

From the point of view of this reconstruction, Pippin’s critical conclusion on Hegel’s “greatest failure” seems not only uncharitable but also beside the point:

Hegel himself, in his greatest failure, never seemed very concerned about this potential instability in the modern world, about citizens of the same ethical commonwealth potentially losing so much common ground and common confidence that a general irresolvability of any of these possible conflicts becomes ever more apparent. . . . He does not worry much because of his general theory about the gradual actual historical achievement of some mutual recognitive status, a historical claim that has come to look like the least plausible aspect of Hegel’s account and that is connected with our resistance to his proclamations about art as a thing of the past.⁵⁷

This rather harsh judgement is again along the lines of the two main points critically discussed earlier. So, my criticism goes: even if we concede that Hegel “never seemed very concerned about this potential instability in the modern world”, this is not because of some premature optimism⁵⁸ inspired by a false belief in an accomplished, enduring stability (the “end of history” pattern). Hegel took that instability not to be something that could be solved, at least directly, by philosophy or even less redressed by art.⁵⁹

Let alone Hegel’s conviction that philosophy cannot be prescriptive or predict the future, even from a purely historical point of view that instability was still too recent and undefined to be properly seen by the “owl of Minerva” of philosophy. As a matter of fact, that instability had only become a *conceptual* problem (i.e. the problem of modernity) in the past few decades at the time of Hegel’s activity, and most confrontations with it were so naïve, or outright conservative and reactionary, that Hegel’s apparent quietism looks progressive by contrast, insofar as he philosophically

begins with the thematization of the “new need” and “restlessness” of his own time.⁶⁰ Indeed: his whole philosophy moves from there, as we saw in Chapter 1, for example, by contrasting Hegel with Schiller. To be sure, one can still criticize Hegel for being *too* quietist or oblivious to the new historical directions, but he was certainly neither blind nor too optimistic about the instability of the modern world.⁶¹ Art is past, in Hegel’s sense, precisely because of such instability, which is too widespread and structural to allow for aesthetic (or even religious) reconciliation. Only the concrete immateriality and universality of the philosophical concept can address it, and even so in an always precarious way.

But what about pictorial modernism? Is Manet, as Pippin views him, not an excellent portrayer of such instability?⁶² Why cannot Hegel’s philosophy at least account for this possibility and, hence, protect itself from the “failure” of the end of art thesis? Again, it is not because of optimism or confidence in the triumph of a disembodied impersonal reason. It is, I suggest, first of all because of the plain fact that Manet’s painting does not and cannot have the same reconciliatory, universally binding, harmonizing power not only of Greek sculpture or tragedy but even of Christian cathedrals or chivalric poems. I think this needs no proof either. Indeed, Manet’s painting bears witness to such impasse: post-Hegelian art in general is characterized by the need and the ability to inwardly record its own limitation.⁶³ The second reason is more contingent on the characteristics of art in Hegel’s time. Even though it would not refute the thesis of art’s past character, something like modernism or at least to that effect might or should have led Hegel to open up more to the possibilities of art after its end. I would concede this, but the problem is that much of the artistic production with which he is confronted in his own time and that presents itself as “the new thing” is not only often quite conservative and naïve (after all, modernism is still a long way to come) but also theoretically problematic, to the extent that it tries to stick to the classical paradigm of art’s highest, divine relevance. This, Hegel cannot but criticize for the reasons we have largely discussed earlier. It is obvious that art after its end is way more open and promising than Hegel’s few and sparse positive or chiaroscuro remarks may make us think, but many of its historical instances were, in Hegel’s eyes, rather backwards and uninspired – too intellectual or too naïve, too ironic or too parasitic on reality, and so on. Now, though, the point is that Hegel’s real dissatisfaction is not so much with this or that shortcoming, but with the claim – all but marginal in his intellectual context and upbringing – of a highest role for art. Faced with such claim, art cannot but end up being uninspiring, reactionary, and even worrying, as capable of shaping a sick, hypocritical yet hypertrophic subjectivity.

To conclude, I believe that what Pippin says about art after the beautiful is profound and enlightening, but I also believe that Hegel can and should

be interpreted in such a way as to be compatible with it in the essential and to avoid the critical objections of an unmotivated essentialism about post-romantic art and of a triumphalist understanding of modernity as the accomplished release of a disembodied reason from the prison of nature. Put otherwise, I fully agree with Pippin's parallel of the role and function of artwork on the one hand and individual action on the other hand, that is, with his claim "that Hegel is asking us to understand the historical and social dimensions of the production and appreciation of artworks in the way that he understands the social meaning of individual actions (and, especially in this context, vice versa)".⁶⁴ I disagree with Pippin's claim that Hegel was oblivious to the high instability and worrying confusion that reigned over both and I maintain, instead, that precisely by way of that parallel one can not only achieve a more nuanced (and charitable) reading of Hegel but also in this way gain important clues about both terms of the parallel.

Notes

- 1 On the issue of Hegel's supposed classicism in connection with the thesis of art's past character, see first Gethmann-Siebert 1984.
- 2 See the whole passage: "In the case of humour, then, art goes out; the subjects are given the peculiarity of the individual without any inner objectivity. This is the disintegration of art, and it is primarily [caused by the fact] that romantic art, in itself a loose connection, falls apart" (ÄK, 153).
- 3 The essential difference is, of course, that classical art accomplishes this work on its own, whereas romantic art gets its content from a revealed religion given elsewhere.
- 4 Here, as already mentioned, I disagree with the "unitary" blueprint in Moland 2019 and agree instead with Peters 2015, 6, claiming "within a Hegelian account that art can emancipate itself from Greek beauty not by becoming non-beautiful art – i.e. by emancipating itself from beauty altogether – but by becoming beautiful in a non-Greek way. Hegel's analysis of the shortcomings of beauty is first and foremost an analysis of the shortcomings of Greek beauty, or of beauty as understood by the Greeks. And this would seem to invite the question of whether there might not be some other form of beauty – perhaps a distinctively modern one – that is free of the specific flaws of the Greek form".
- 5 This is, evidently, another way of framing the problem of individual *Bildung* and action, as discussed in the previous chapter.
- 6 On Hegel's speculative philosophy as "therapy", see chapter 3 of Quante 2011.
- 7 I will return to the possibility of such a disruptive version of modern subjectivity and to Hegel's criticism thereof in my discussion of Pippin in the last section of this chapter.
- 8 A detachment that paradoxically might still be more in touch with reality than the classical pattern. See Peters 2015, 127: "If the problematic feature of classical beauty is that it draws on and affirms a continuity between artistic beauty and human nature, then a less problematic type of artistic beauty might be one that explicitly abandons this continuity".

- 9 Art is then fragmentary in a radical sense. Unlike the Romantic fragment, which can still hope to refer at least asymptotically to, or symbolize, or allegorize, a totality beyond appearance, the “Hegelian fragment” renounces even this aspiration. See also Siani 2013a.
- 10 Put it another way, the art of the formalism of subjectivity, if thus conceived, can help face the danger of formalism as an absolutized standpoint.
- 11 Differently worded: “Hegel calls not for the abandonment of art but for a better understanding of what art means in the context of a prosaic age that art by definition cannot fully grasp: an age in which humans are aware of their own divinity, anti-climactic though it might be, but still searching for ways to embody that awareness” (Moland 2019, 133).
- 12 Danto 1992, 9.
- 13 For a broad overview of the different meanings and contexts of the “end of art” thesis throughout Danto’s production, see first Cascales 2018. An interesting overview, pursuing a different, independent philosophical aim, can be found in the first chapter of Campana 2019.
- 14 Danto 1986, 111.
- 15 Danto 1986, 111.
- 16 See, e.g., Danto 2005, 10.
- 17 See Cascales 2018.
- 18 See Danto 2005, 6–8.
- 19 For a different “Hegelian” criticism of Danto, see Houlgate 2013.
- 20 Danto 1986, 114.
- 21 Danto 2005, 11. “Danto reads Hegel as saying that everything is possible in art after the romantic form of art because nothing is of interest any more” (Bertram 2022, 125).
- 22 See Jaeschke 2014. It is in this sense that one should understand Hegel’s statement that “no content, no form, is any longer immediately identical with the inwardness, the nature, the unconscious substantial essence of the artist; every material may be indifferent to him if only it does not contradict the formal law of being simply beautiful and capable of artistic treatment” (A, 605, on which, see Houlgate 2013, 266–267). Art that, in different ways, does not comply with this formal law meets what Moland 2019, 11, calls its “prosaic endings”.
- 23 To be sure, even objects of craftsmanship, in our own time, have progressively entered the domain of art or asserted a right of abode in it, but they do so, as Danto himself acknowledges, exactly by refusing to be reduced to mere accessories and demanding, instead, to be taken as meaningful objects, that is, as objects that, unlike mere ornaments, are “about” something and, as such, are art: see Danto 1998, 136–137. This has clearly led to a broadening and democratization not only of the range of art objects, but also of the art subjects (just think, to quote Danto’s examples here, of traditionally female-dominated crafts such as knitting, or of folk art, etc.).
- 24 Houlgate 2013, 270–271.
- 25 “We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection” (A, 103). Consider also, of course, Hegel’s reflections on the *Humanus* we saw in Chapter 2.
- 26 Danto 1986, 114–115.
- 27 Danto 2005, 6–7.
- 28 Danto 1986, 110–111.
- 29 Danto 1986, 11.
- 30 Danto 1986, 113.

- 31 On the persistence of metaphysics in Danto, Houlgate 2013 and Bertram 2022 are in agreement, though from different perspectives.
- 32 Danto 1998, 133.
- 33 Danto 1998, 132.
- 34 See Danto 1998, 133.
- 35 Danto 1998, 133.
- 36 See also the quite bewildering “concession”: “By way of concession, I think that aestheticians have had far too restricted a range of aesthetic qualities to deal with – the beautiful and the ugly and the plain. And have assigned to taste far too central a role in the experience of art. I feel that expanding this range will itself be an exciting philosophical project. But it falls outside the range of defining art” (Danto 1998, 133).
- 37 “My aim has been essentialist – to find a definition of art everywhere and always true” (Danto 1998, 128).
- 38 See, instead, Danto 1986, 113: the closest thing to an end of history is “art in our times”, when “the object in which the artwork consists is so irradiated by theoretical consciousness that . . . it little matters whether art is philosophy in action or philosophy is art in thought”.
- 39 Danto 1986, 111.
- 40 I insist on the (quasi-pragmatist) “broadness” of this sense of aesthetics, which I think we should take seriously in Hegel. In a limited, narrow sense of the word, as having to do only with taste and aesthetic experience in its isolation, one may indeed reply that “aesthetics” is “absent” not only in a large portion of the analytic philosophy of art, but even in Hegel himself (see, most notably, Pippin 2008). I do not, however, really see the point of such a narrow use of the term with regard to Hegel.
- 41 “Innocence, therefore, is merely non-action, like the mere being of a stone, not even that of a child” (PhS, 282): the passage is found in Hegel’s discussion of ethical action in the *Phenomenology*, on which see the next chapter.
- 42 First of all, indeed, the “formal law of being simply beautiful and capable of artistic treatment” we saw earlier.
- 43 The reference here is Pippin 2014.
- 44 Pippin 2014, 60.
- 45 See Pippin 2014, 37.
- 46 For a broader outline of my criticism, see Siani 2020b.
- 47 See also Kottman 2018, 281 ff.
- 48 The idea of a cunning of reason can admittedly sound even more bewildering than the end of art one. It makes much more sense, however, at least from a Hegelian perspective, if one focuses not on the by now stereotyped version we find in the philosophy of history, but instead on the more nuanced and useful one from the Preface of the *Phenomenology*: “Science is not that idealism which replaced the dogmatism of assertion with a dogmatism of assurance, or a dogmatism of self-certainty. On the contrary, since [our] knowing sees the content return into its own inwardness, its activity is totally absorbed in the content, for it is the immanent self of the content; yet it has at the same time returned into itself, for it is pure self-identity in otherness. Thus it is the cunning [List] which, while seeming to abstain from activity, looks on and watches how determinateness, with its concrete life, just where it fancies it is pursuing its own self-preservation and particular interest, is in fact doing the very opposite, is an activity that results in its own dissolution, and makes itself a moment of the whole” (PhS, 33).

- 49 This is what Pippin himself would rightly decry as a return to essentialism that betrays historicism.
- 50 The reference is to PhS, 3: "To help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title '*love of knowing*' and be *actual knowing* – that is what I have set myself to do". See Siani 2020b.
- 51 More on this in the next chapter.
- 52 See, in a similar vein, Horowitz 2014: "From the standpoint of Absolute Knowing, which has no truck with the idea than any facts of human sociality are merely given by nature but locates and treats them as products of human history, the problem of the unsatisfied demands of mutuality and recognition can never be solved once and for all. It is a cardinal achievement of Absolute Knowing – let's call it in this context secular modernity – that no system of norms can ever reasonably declare itself definitive, in the sense of fully adequate to the demands on mutuality and recognition the world continually throws up. This implies that problems of mutuality and recognition can now finally be seen to be concretely historico-political problems".
- 53 For a similar line of criticism, see Kottman, 286–288. On the issues left open by Pippin's separation of Hegel's teleology from the problem of reconciliation, see also Rush 2015.
- 54 Here, the question could be raised about the possibility of a *contemporary* version of a basically ethically compact and substantial community, and of the correspondingly absolute role art (and religion: just think of a theocracy!) could play in it. I will say something about this in the conclusion of the next chapter. See also Siani 2019a.
- 55 On history, philosophy, and contingency, see also Henrich 1971; Siani 2015a.
- 56 See Quante 2011, 295–297.
- 57 Pippin 2014, 60.
- 58 "It is now generally acknowledged that Hegel's understanding of these objective social conditions was prematurely optimistic, but his explanation of *what we need to take account of* in understanding subjective intention and meaning and his insistence on a link with the objective conditions remain a kind of modern fate, and one that needs to be set inside the later context of the fractured and prosaic character of the emerging, industrialized, bourgeois, eventually consumerist nation-state world coming into view in the nineteenth century" (Pippin 2014, 61–62).
- 59 "The transformations characteristic of the emergence of modernity generate a specific form of life in which developments of universal significance persistently negate rather than fulfill the specific interests of the social actors who are their authors and bearers. Jointly, they entail that recognition and redress can no longer be conceived, from either a theoretical or practical point of view, as a matter of mutual address among individuals in a political space made unitary and coherent by a singular sovereign authority. For this reason, social space that is intrinsically contradictory – what we might, to capture the matter in a formula, call the space of capitalist modernity – threatens the address of art not so much with extinction as with irrelevance. But then again: if one thinks of the function of art as rectifying deficits of mutuality and recognition, perhaps irrelevance simply is the way art goes extinct by rendering itself serenely insensitive to historical-political change? Perhaps, in other words, art goes extinct by carrying on unchanged, thereby allowing us to indulge the fantasy of a mode of redress that is unavailable to us? It is, I want to suggest, in order to block exactly this possibility that Hegel framed the thesis that art had become a thing of the

- past. Put another way: It is, for Hegel, only when we can frame the thought that the institution of art can come to an end that we can discern its specific cultural significance, its specific social and political functioning” (Horowitz 2014).
- 60 The whole Preface to the *Phenomenology* can be read as an essay to this effect.
- 61 See also the considerations on ethical-political instability in the previous chapter, as well as what I will say about the problem of world history (and of human rights) in the next chapter. Similarly, Moland 2019, 8, raises a few sound points *contra* Pippin (but actually remarking that Pippin himself is well aware of that) to show that Hegel “is not guilty of this kind of naïveté and so does not need rescuing from it”.
- 62 Or, for that matter, Hollywood films, which also support Pippin’s objection to art’s past character.
- 63 In a somewhat similar vein, see Kottman 2018, 283, which challenges the direct implication created by Pippin between the (alleged) rationality of modern society and art’s past character: “Even if Hegel regarded the basic structure of modern society (objective spirit) as at least incipiently rational, that would still not be sufficient justification for him to declare art (a dimension of Absolute Spirit) a thing of the past. Hegel would still want to know how that incipient rationality had been taken up *by* art as part of *its* internal self-limitation”. Here, I cannot go into the details of Kottman’s own proposal, which I find convincing in many respects.
- 64 Pippin 2014, 57–58. See my discussion of this parallel in the third paragraph of the previous chapter.

5 Antigone, the Disappearance of the Tragic, and Human Rights

Compared to the previous ones, this chapter takes a fairly different approach to the meaning, value, and contemporary attractiveness of Hegel's thesis of art's past character. While still directly addressing Hegel's aesthetics, it builds a bridge with our times that goes beyond aesthetics, arguing that a specific thread of the thesis, namely the disappearance of the tragic, can help develop an innovative approach to the philosophy of human rights. Such thread is pursued from Hegel's famous reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* to his idea of the right of the "world spirit" as an absolute right.¹ After clarifying Hegel's concept of the tragic and of the fundamental ethical-political role of tragedy in classical Greek ethical life (1), the chapter shows how the latter is dissolved by the very action of tragedy (2). The worlds that came into being after such dissolution, that is, the Roman and the modern Germanic ones, are characterized by the absence of a tragic destiny, which, according to an expression Hegel borrows from Napoleon, is replaced by politics (3). In the prose of modernity, I further argue, the return of the tragic as an irresistible clash of supposedly absolute, unilateral rights becomes a constantly looming possibility in the relationship between states, so that, in the modern state, justice is always imperfect and exposed to the contingency of relations between states. It is only at the level of world history, beyond the boundaries of each individual state, that the only absolute right arises, namely the right of the world spirit, where the objective and the absolute spirit, and politics and philosophy, meet (4). Hegel's idea of "world history as the world's court of judgement", mindful of Antigone's destiny, can help develop an appropriate response to the return of tragic conflict in terms of a concrete and realistic approach to human rights (5).

The Tragedy in the Ethical and the Ethical in the Tragedy

It could *prima facie* appear that the tragic opposition portrayed in Sophocles' *Antigone* reflects a contrast of positive state law and eternal unwritten

justice. King Creon forbids the burial of Polyneices, who had waged war against the city of Thebes. Antigone, Polyneices' sister, breaks the ban and buries him. Creon sentences her to death and has her walled up alive. Antigone's fiancé Haimon, who is also Creon's son, kills himself and so does Eurydice, Creon's wife. On the one hand, it seems, we have a tyrannical state power (Creon), on the other hand, the upholding of an eternal unwritten justice that flows in family blood and is superior to state law (Antigone), and in the end, the inevitable tragic outcome. According to this reading, Antigone's character has often been taken to represent the primordial paradigm of the resistance to state oppression in the name of a natural eternal (and feminine) justice that cannot be abolished. At least in Hegel's interpretation, however, *Antigone* by no means represents a conflict between eternal justice and tyrannical state power: this would be a one-sided and abstract reading.² On the contrary, Hegel portrays an opposition of two equally justified and equally one-sided ethical powers: Antigone has "a worthy cause for action, and likewise Creon's command is justified inasmuch as the brother came as an enemy of the fatherland and sought to destroy it" and "the two ethical powers there are family and the state" (ÄH, 95 and 168; see also PhR, 169). The opposition thus takes place between two laws, both of which are conditional on a higher justice. Such higher justice demands that both sides be recognized precisely as sides, and not as an ethical whole each. The tragic conflict is precisely the process of actualization of ethical justice.³

In order to understand Hegel's interpretation, we need to schematically set it in the context of his concept of tragedy and the tragic, in particular in the *Phenomenology* and his later lectures on aesthetics.⁴ The first point to clarify is that Hegel's theory of tragedy can be read as a hermeneutics of the experience of the tragic, whereby the latter is not to be understood in the generic sense of a human feeling or artistic category, but as a specific dialectical moment and figure in the history of consciousness.⁵ We are in the context, already touched upon in Chapter 2, of Greek ethical life and the phenomenology of the origin of modern subjectivity. Greek ethical life takes the connotation of the immediate, still unreflected ethical spirit, which is however inwardly split, at first unconsciously, into "a human and a divine law" (PhS, 551): the human, male state principle, and the divine, female family principle. This hints precisely at Sophocles' *Antigone*.⁶ At first, the two laws statically exist beside and at rest with each other. The conflict between them is necessarily brought about by "ethical action" (PhS, 554). The acting individual (the hero) comes to bear one of the two laws and does so in an absolute way, that is, ignoring the other's right, since ethical life is considered to be immediately compact and inseverable. In other words, subjectivity, where different, even opposing powers or values can coexist in a reflective way, is still absent.⁷ The

hero unilaterally upholds a single ethical power, which others oppose to as rightfully. None of them can be right in an absolute sense, since all of them are right. Attention should be paid to the fact that the development of the ethical action of the heroes (in this case Antigone and Creon) is not only observed by a third party (the audience) but also accompanied by an involved viewer or a second lead: the chorus. These three actors (the heroes, the chorus, and the audience) correspond to three ethical-historical levels, the interaction of which must be analysed if we want to explain the emergence of tragic justice and the political-spiritual world that is based on it.

The chorus is the foundation of tragedy and ethical action: it is “no mere external reflection, but the ground of the heroes themselves The chorus can be compared to the spiritual architecture that encloses the images of the gods, the heroes” (ÄH, 303). The chorus represents the immediate and unreflected ethical life, that is, the state of calm and conflictless immobility. It is the simple, conceptless affirmative power, which,

lacking the power of the negative, . . . is unable to hold together and to subdue the riches and varied abundance of the divine life, but lets it all go its own separate ways, and in its reverential hymns it extols each individual moment as an independent god, first one and then another.

(PhS, 444)

The chorus is the expression of the abstract ideal, where the universal and the individual harmoniously live together, since the plurality of gods (and of the ethical powers for which they stand) is not opposed to the absoluteness of ethical life, for the gods do not engage in mutual action yet. In each god, the substantial ethical content is worshipped without the plurality leading back to a systematic unity, for which purpose the negative power of the concept/subjectivity would be required. The ideal expression of such ideal, timeless condition is the god in the form of the classical, beautiful statue: nothing forbids worshipping a statue as if it were the only deity, even though the worshipper is aware that there are several other statues/deities. But, as soon as the contrast between the human and the divine laws arises, on this same ground arises the hero, who unilaterally represents one of the many sides.

Classical tragedy is thus based on and revolves around two opposite poles: the chorus and the heroes.⁸ The latter's action only makes sense against the former's background. Tragedy begins by violating the state of quiet in relation to which the heroes set themselves a goal:

The ethical powers are various. In the quiet state they are in harmony as a circle of gods. But it must also happen that they are violated, thereby

they are called to the manifest activity; individuals thus appear as the *πάθος*, as the realisation of an ethical power.

(ÄH, 302)

There is thus a double split: on the one hand, a split between the ethical immediacy of the chorus and the one-sided pathos of the hero, and on the other, the split between the various forms of unilaterality that are embodied by each hero.⁹ Through the heroes' action, the once compact, unreflected unity of the ethical powers splits and becomes individualized, triggering the powers that were hitherto in a state of (negative) peace. This results in mutual hostility: the hero's subjective action and purpose necessarily sparkle conflict with the other powers. Unlike modern drama, this conflict is not caused by chance or mere malice, it is a necessary conflict, for both ethical powers are justified: "No evil will, no mere misfortune brings about the collision, but the ethical justification from both sides. Abstract evil is neither true nor interesting" (ÄH, 303).

In a nutshell: first, we have a negatively peaceful, because inactive, coexistence of a plurality of ethical powers, which, however, since they are not differentiated from one another yet, do not yet exist as such, but as a single static, ethical whole. At the second stage, these powers are triggered by subjective action and individualized in the heroes' pathos. Since the chorus, acting as the ethical groundwork, defends the right of ethical life as such without distinction, the hero, who is generated from and acts on that ground, cannot but see the power he triggers as absolutely justified, and thus necessarily comes into conflict with the other powers, which, in turn, grasp their own right just as absolutely. The hero is a plastic figure that knows no inner division or indecision, but lives, acts, and perishes on the basis of a one-sided principle, leading to the tragic conclusion. Here, by the way, there is a clear difference between the classical and the modern concept of guilt:

The heroes are as guilty as they are innocent. We [moderns] imagine guilt as occurring when the individual could choose. . . . But in the plastic figures such choice is removed, the individual is what he is, he acts out of this character, this pathos, and he is a character because he is precisely this.

(ÄH, 305)

The heroes' one-sidedness has to be punished not as the result of their reflected choice, but as their own nature: in this respect, the heroes are simultaneously guilty and innocent. This is also the ground of their aesthetic power: "This is the strength of the ancient characters, that they do not choose, but what they do, they are" (ÄH, 305).

From the Death of Antigone to the Death of the Polis

The conclusion and core of the tragedy is the recognition of the equality of conflicting powers and the overcoming of ethical one-sidedness. The substantial purpose is preserved and justified, but no longer as an absolute: for this, the sacrifice of the individual is necessary, though not necessarily the physical sacrifice, as in the “most perfect” (ÄH, 306) case of Antigone. It is, indeed, not the individual who consciously accomplishes the reconciliation, but a higher power that overwhelms and annihilates individuality: destiny, which steps in as the incomprehensible but (unlike blind fate) necessary and true justice, causing the laceration of individual consciousness, still unable to fully bear the burden of reflectivity with its consequences. The tragic conflict is only negatively reconciled: “Only in the downfall of both sides alike is absolute right accomplished, and the ethical substance as the negative power which engulfs both sides, that is, omnipotent and righteous Destiny, steps on the scene” (PhS, 285).¹⁰ It is thus a reconciliation that actually reveals the inner weakness of Greek ethical life and the necessity of its demise and a transition to the next figure of consciousness, which is, not by chance, the “legal status” (*Rechtszustand*) of the Roman world (see PhS, 290).¹¹ Through destiny, justice steps in as the assertion of the equal right of the different ethical powers. But it is still only an assertion by way of negation, which presents actions not as expressions of reflectively traceable and justifiable values, but as a necessity built on grounds that are unfathomable to the individual. Still missing is the principle according to which one can only be held responsible for what one has consciously wanted and done, namely the principle of morality that is peculiar to modernity.¹² The tragic hero suffers and perishes regardless of his personal responsibility. He is not positively aware of his own guilt, for which he is punished, but grasps his fault only in a negative way, because of his suffering, according to Antigone’s famous sentence: “Because we suffer we acknowledge we have erred” (PhS, 284; see also ÄH, 307).

This brings us directly to the third level of tragedy, the level of the third-party viewer, that is, the citizen watching the performance. Reconciliation in tragedy leads to reconciliation through tragedy. The hero’s submission to destiny in the tragedy leads the external spectators to a reflective realization of the existence of different powers, which are certainly opposed to each other but have equal rights, since all of them give structure to the ethical life of the polis. In the dramatic enactment of its own ethical genesis, the polis sees its values and customs justified and confirmed, but on a higher (because already partly reflective) level than that of an immediate ethical belonging and identification. Such distinction between different ethical levels corresponds to a historical one: in the tragedy, action takes place in a time before the present of the polis, with the heroes endorsing

principles and values which they try to enforce through their actions. On the other hand, the audience already lives in a later state, in which the normative level has been to a larger extent objectified, that is, it is not embodied in individual actions but in the values and laws of the objective ethical life. Classical tragedy is thus, for Hegel, first and foremost a defining powerful experience of political participation and ethical communality.¹³ Through tragedy, the citizen recognizes and appropriates the right and duty to support the foundations of coexistence through his subjective evaluative skills. The level of immediate and unreflective ethical life is thus already overcome: the communality brought to light by the tragic experience in fact establishes and steers the polis in its unity by acknowledging the equal right of the different normative claims. With this, however, the polis is doomed, as the very reflective experience that grounds the polis in its unity eventually results in the fragmentation of ethical life and in the inner collapse of the polis at the hand of individuality, which questions the ethical substance as such and claims the supreme right of subjectivity. This clearly recalls Socrates, sentenced to death by the Athenians for philosophically announcing the forthcoming principle of subjective freedom, and thus the death of the polis. However, since Socrates announced a principle that had already taken firm roots in the polis, according to Hegel, both Socrates and the Athenians who sentenced him, just like Antigone and Creon, are guilty and innocent at the same time, like the living characters of a highly political tragedy (see PhG, 328–329). But even before Socrates, tragedy already shows that the powers that will destroy the ethical community feed on tragedy itself and its reflective potential.¹⁴

Modernity and the Disappearance of the Tragic

In the strict sense of the word, speaking of tragic ethical life, there can be no talk of “right” yet, as “right is the existence of the absolute concept or of self-conscious freedom” (PhR, 47), which are still missing. Neither does justice take the form of a set of state-approved laws on human action, but that of revenge.¹⁵ Right is still inherent in the concept, but is not actual, as it can only be actualized by human conscious activity, which is still missing. That is why justice steps in in the form of destiny: as absolute necessity, not yet as freedom. Classical tragedy is the representation of the execution of justice in a form that is still unintelligible and inscrutable to human beings. The heroes, as we saw, only negatively become aware of their guilt through suffering, not because they have a clear insight into the necessity and reasons of that suffering as a punishment. On the other hand, the audience thus experiences the tragic event as a mechanism whereby justice shows up as destiny. The tragic outcome *is* justice, and tragedy is its representation for the purpose of ethical-political self-recognition and

orientation, but without the self-conscious individual playing any central role. This brings us, by contrast, to the modern world. The modern world, as we know, is characterized for Hegel by the fact that the subject is free as such, and not as part of a compact ethical group. One of the consequences is that the awareness is attained that all human beings are free, whereas, in antiquity, only some were free, depending on their familial, ethnic, and religious affiliation.¹⁶ In modernity, we no longer speak of the right of this or that ethical power, we speak of the right of the subject as such. The ethical content has now been internalized: the acting subject is no longer the unconscious trigger or bearer of the right of an ethical power that is external to him, he is the bearer of his own right. This leads to the fragmentation of ethical life: modern society is necessarily characterized by conflict and alienation. Consequently, justice no longer steps in as a balancing destiny, but as an increasingly precarious reflective attempt to hold the different interests and insights of the subjects together.

In short, in modernity, justice appears primarily in a political form. To introduce this thesis, the compelling reference is Napoleon's famous conversation with Goethe, which Hegel hints at in his lectures on the philosophy of history: "Napoleon said to Goethe that the interest of tragedy was destiny, and with us [moderns], since we no longer had this destiny of the ancients, politics could take its place" (PhG, 393). Modernity is a time without destiny, or, better, politics is its destiny. This is a direct consequence of the self-assertion of the principle of subjective freedom against, or from the ashes of, the ancient compact ethical life. As far as tragedy is concerned, such change corresponds to the fact that "in modern tragedy . . . the chorus does not [fit]" (ÄH, 303). Since we have seen the weight that Hegel attaches to the chorus in ancient tragedy, it is clear that the incompatibility of the chorus with modern tragedy is not merely a tenet of drama theory but stands for the fact that modern ethical life can no longer come in the form of a compact harmonic unity.

The "internalization" of the ethical powers in the human subject corresponds to the "internalization" of justice in the political subject, namely the state.¹⁷ That the state is now the bearer of internalized ethical determinations does not mean it becomes an absolute, quasi-divine subject in which individual particularity is lost, but, quite the opposite, that individuals now have a framework for the full actualization of their concrete and self-conscious freedom. In modernity, justice is no longer the external, inscrutable power of destiny, it is the result of political decisions and negotiations. Or, in Hegel's words:

The *constitution* is this overall articulation of *state-power*. It involves the determinations of the way in which the rational will – in so far as in individuals it is only *in itself* the universal will – firstly, comes to

consciousness and understanding of itself and is *found*, and is, secondly, posited in actuality, through the agency of the government and its particular branches, and maintained in actuality, and also protected against the contingent subjectivity both of these governmental departments and of individuals. The constitution is existent *justice*, as the actuality of *freedom* in the development of all its rational determinations.

(E, 237)

In plain language, in the modern state, justice exists in the form of the constitution. Accordingly, since classical tragedy had to present the occurrence of justice in the form of the necessity of destiny as its substantial content, and since modern justice takes the form of a state constitution, it follows that modern drama can no longer have any substantial content. So, for example, Shakespeare's tragedies stage characters who are merely guided by particular passions: love in *Romeo and Juliet*, jealousy in *Othello*, lust for power in *Macbeth*, madness in *King Lear*, etc. (see ÄK, 233–234).¹⁸ Representative of Hegel's notion of modern drama is Schiller too: his plays, especially *The Robbers* and *Wallenstein*, show how, in a social context that is already structured by objective rational normative bonds, the subjective attempt to change the given ethical life through violence does not lead to reconciliation, however tragic, and to the acknowledgement of new values, as in classical tragedy, but to the hero's failure, his actions, despite his good intentions, now resulting in crime or frustration (see ÄP, 87–88). To paraphrase Brecht, a functioning modern ethical life does not need heroes.

Action in modern drama introduces fragmentation without offering a reconciliation to which the citizen/audience can relate, both ethically and aesthetically. On the one hand, modern drama cannot provide the reconciliation of spirit that was inherent in the outcome of classical tragedy, and, on the other hand, it cannot offer, at least in a direct way, a paradigm for the justification of ethical life and the steering of action. The failure of individual heroic action corresponds to the inadequacy of tragedy and, more generally, of art as a form of the absolute spirit for these purposes.¹⁹ This is, clearly, yet another facet of the thesis of art's past character. Classical tragedy and classical art in general are ultimately appropriate only to their own time, since they are based on a substantial ethical life that is shared by the spectator. In contrast, modern drama is not self-sufficient: if we want to understand the motives of the plot and the hero's failure, we need to go up to the level of reflection and philosophy, the form of absolute spirit that is adequate to the modern world.²⁰ The highest contents can no longer be grasped, justified, or conveyed by an aesthetic-mythological form, but only by a conceptual-philosophical reconstruction. This also means that they are potentially transparent to humans or, better, that all supreme contents have now become (all too) human: politics is now destiny.

Right becomes the existence of the free and self-conscious will, which can be argumentatively and rationally justified: I can claim a right if it is indeed my freedom in its concrete existence, which can only be defended discursively and through conceptual means. Certainly, different rights can collide, not only as a conflict between the rights of private individuals but also, or mainly, as a conflict of different levels of rights, as thematized by Hegel. This means abstract law against morality, morality against ethical life, the right of the family against the right of civil society, the right of the state against civil society, and so forth:

Every stage in the development of the Idea of freedom has its own special right, since it is the existence of freedom in one of its own determinations. . . . Morality, ethical life, the interest of the state, each of these is a distinctive right because each of them is a specific determination and existence of freedom. They can come into collision with each other only insofar as they are all equally rights. . . . Yet at the same time collision involves another moment, namely the fact that it is restrictive, and so if two rights collide one is subordinated to the other.

(PhR, 47–48)

Justice becomes the general framework within which such conflicts can be managed, to some extent, in a conscious and rational way: it exists, as we saw, as constitution – as the result of political decisions and arrangements. But, as I am going to explain in the next section, justice as constitution, which is peculiar to the modern state, is by no means the ultimately perfect and omnipotent figure of justice. On the contrary, it is always particular and incomplete, since, like every other right bar one, it is subordinated to a higher right. The one right, which is subordinated to no other, is the right of the world spirit, as shown in the conclusion of the last quoted passage: “It is only the right of the world-spirit which is absolute without qualification” (PhR, 48).

The World’s Court of Judgement

The state is only one of the limited stages in the actualization of right. That the right of the state has no claim to absoluteness is also clearly shown by Hegel’s explanation of the “right between states [*das äußere Staatsrecht*]” (PhR, 311). At this level,

Since the sovereignty of a state is the principle of its relations to others, states are to that extent in a state of nature in relation to each other. Their rights are actualized only in their particular wills and not in a universal will constituted as a power over them.

(PhR, 312)

states behave towards each other as special individuals, which is why no state can lay claim to any absolute right. It is only because “there is no praetor to judge between states” (PhR, 313) that, according to Hegel, the “right within the state” constitutes the highest *political* instance of justice. The level of right between states is, to paraphrase Hegel’s characterization of civil society (see PhR, 182), the system of lost justice. There is no constitution between states that can systematically regulate conflicts. Agreements between states always depend on the contingent good will of governments. If such good will fails, then only war is left as method for resolving conflicts: “If states disagree and their particular wills cannot be harmonized, the matter can only be settled by *war*” (PhR, 313). Here, ethical life comes, once again, in the form of the “ought-to-be [*Sollen*]” (see PhR, 311). Interestingly for our reference to *Antigone*, Hegel describes the mutual relationship of the states like a play:

It is as *particular* entities that states enter into relations with one another. Hence their relations are on the largest scale a highly animated play of external contingency and the inner particularity of passions, interests and purposes, talents and virtues, vices, force, and wrong – a play wherein the ethical whole itself, the independence of the state, is exposed to contingency.

(PhR, 315)

The mutual relationship of the states is characterized by finitude and fortuitousness, not by the (conditional) universality, rationality, and necessity that are peculiar to the state’s internal law. There is, apparently, no justice in right between states.

In this process, however, a higher level emerges dialectically: the level of the spirit of the world, whereby it becomes clear that the right of the states does not find its true accomplishment in the states themselves, but in their contribution to world history:

The principles of the spirits of peoples [*Volksgeister*] are in general restricted on account of their particularity, for it is in this particularity that, as *existent* individuals, they have their objective actuality and their self-consciousness. Their deeds and destinies in their relations to one another are the manifest [*erscheinende*] dialectic of the finitude of these spirits, and out of it arises the *universal spirit*, the *spirit of the world*, free from all restriction, producing itself as that which exercises its right – and its right is the highest right of all – over these finite spirits in world history as the *world’s court of judgement* [in der *Weltgeschichte*, als dem *Weltgerichte*].

(PhR, 315)

The universality and unlimited right established at the level of world history are, however, not political in the narrow sense, since no corresponding political institution is responsible for them: we are here at the edge of “objective” spirit. After the political justice of the state’s inner right and its loss in the right between states, justice makes a comeback, in a non-political form. Hegel’s separation of the two levels, that is, the “right between states” and “world history”, holds together the statement of the objective, non-absolute nature of the state, which is fraught with contingency, and the recognition that, despite this, states do contribute to the right of the spirit of the world, located at the edge of objectivity. The sphere of world history marks the transition from the objective spirit and the law of politics to the absolute spirit, whereby the law of politics is sublated and finds its truth. On the one hand, there is an objective right inherent in the sovereignty of the state; on the other hand, there is an ultimate justice that is greater than that right. The political justice that is actualized in the state is always limited, unlike the non-political justice that comes to light in the transition from the objective to the absolute spirit:

Justice and virtue, injustice, force and vice, talents and their deeds, passions strong and weak, guilt and innocence, grandeur in individual and national life, independence, fortune and misfortune of states and individuals, all these have their specific significance and worth in the field of conscious actuality; therein they are judged and justice – though only imperfect [*unvollkommene*] justice – is meted out to them. World-history, however, falls outside the point of view from which these things matter.
(PhR, 317)

No matter how wise, virtuous, rational the states and individuals can be, their right is always a limited one, and the justice they accomplish is always “imperfect” or “incomplete”.

World history is the last, definitive instance of justice, which is in awe of no constitution: it is, indeed, the world court, as Hegel, quoting Schiller, writes. World history as the world court, though, is not a transcendent power like Antigone’s destiny. The justice accomplished in world history is now inherent in the human world and can be philosophically construed as progress in the consciousness of freedom:

In world history it is not merely the *power* [*Macht*] of spirit that passes judgement, i.e. the abstract and non-rational necessity of a blind destiny. On the contrary, . . . world history is the necessary development, out of the concept of spirit’s freedom alone, of the moments of reason and so of the self-consciousness and freedom of spirit.

(PhR, 316)

In other words, the course of history does not assert the mere right of the most powerful (“might is right” is no justice after all), but each time the right of the higher moment of the consciousness of freedom. Here, it becomes clear what the separation of right within the state, right between states, and world history means, in this context. Although the right of subjective freedom is, to some extent, actualized and institutionally secured in the modern state, there is the risk that, because of this, the modern state may claim an absolute right for itself. However, that the right of the individual states is only partial and subject to contingency is shown by the fact that the mutual relationship between states comes in the form of a state of nature. Now, if Hegel had been a sceptic or a relativist, this second state of nature would be the end of the objective spirit. On the contrary, there is, above the state’s external law (and every other law), the final judgement of world history, wherein all particular rights find their truth and universality.

Antigone and Human Rights

Since world history constitutes the ultimate instance of justice, though a justice that is no longer “political” in the strict sense but acts as a hinge between the objective and the absolute spirit, providing an interpretation of the “perfect” justice (as opposed to the always “imperfect” one actualized by the states) of world history is of paramount importance. In this last section, I will pursue such aim by drawing a line from Hegel’s interpretation of *Antigone* to the question of the role and nature of human rights. My suggestion is that the separation of the two levels, that of the right between states and that of world history, can be interpreted according to the tragic model of the distinction between the opposition of unilateral but absolute rights on the one hand and a higher justice on the other. This does not mean, of course, that the Hegelian understanding of justice on a global level is to be likened to the obscure, negative destiny of classical tragedy. On the contrary, I think that the dialectical movement that comes about in Hegel’s interpretation of *Antigone* can apply to Hegel’s understanding of the relations between states and justice at a global level, and that such understanding can thereby gain relevance and attractiveness. Relations between states, we might say, are a battleground for recognition on a global scale, parallel to the struggle for recognition on the part of individuals and powers, which, in the history of the modern European world as philosophically recounted by Hegel, has led from Antigone’s destiny to the political and immanent conception of justice and the rule of law.²¹

Our contemporary global struggle for recognition obviously takes often disturbingly unreconcilable forms: ethnic and religious conflict, ideological incompatibility, sheer economic or military power relations, clashes of

civilizations, and so on. In all these forms, the struggle becomes an absolute clash that threatens progress in the accomplishment of freedom by threatening the right of subjective freedom. This is precisely where the discourse on human rights steps in. The goal of such discourse is to steer this struggle for recognition as much as possible towards a struggle for the assertion of ethical-political forms in which the subject's right to freedom is regarded as paramount and fundamentally inviolable. One can, of course, reject such goal as utopian, or one can strive to find some conceptual means for designing, to put it with Rawls, a "realistic utopia".²² In this case, Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone* as a conflict of individuals who assume to be integralist carriers of absolute values or rights, with tragic outcomes, can make an unexpected and challenging contribution.

According to my reading, the ultimate instance of justice accomplished in world history is a global justice embodied in and defined by the idea of human rights. In other words, the only right that is superior to any other is the right of the human subject as such, that is, human right, and the only justice that is accomplished is the international justice that protects and reinforces human right. This assumption may not sound Hegelian, since Hegel does not link human rights with world history, nor, for that matter, does he seem to care much about human rights.²³ However, I believe that there are good reasons not only to "update" Hegel's philosophy of history by looking at it through the contemporary idea of human rights but also, conversely, to contribute to a Hegelian-dialectical approach to the philosophical debate on human rights, as a counterpoint to illuminist cosmopolitanism.²⁴ Indeed, the discourse on human rights relies on the principle of the freedom of the subject as the ultimate normative source. This is potentially a universal principle that has been historically and culturally developed in the modern Western world. The question of whether and how such principle can be acknowledged and concretely enforced in other historical and cultural realities as well as in some Western communities or doctrines is a delicate one. It may, I suggest, be interpreted along the lines of the Hegelian "ethical action", setting in motion a tragic conflict between ethical powers that may not find a "constitutional" solution, that is, be solved by the prosaic, political justice of the rule of law. The conflict between communitarian values and cosmopolitanism based on the "modern" right of subjective freedom can indeed take a tragic shape in Hegelian terms.²⁵ Both sides are threatened by the tragic one-sidedness, according to which each player seems to bear absolute, incommunicable values. With each side claiming an absolute right and essentializing the other side as the absolute other, justice is pushed out both sides. Just as, according to Hegel, *Antigone* does not display an abstract opposition between positive law and unwritten justice, the conflict of cosmopolitanism and communitarian values is also to be seen as a collision between different dimensions

of right that must be reconciled within the framework of a higher justice that recognizes and protects both sides.²⁶

But the difference with *Antigone* is striking: there, reconciling justice took a negative, aesthetically powerful form (destiny) not fully amenable to reflection, while we have available a philosophical form in which the notion of human rights is rooted. Developing an adequate framework with the aim of reconciling both sides, without replacing the universal scope of the discourse on human rights with pure relativism, is the central task of the philosophy of human rights (and, of course, one of the greatest problems of our time). In my view, such an attempt at reconciliation, among many other things, must necessarily undergo a deep reworking of modern Western cosmopolitanism, as much in its conceptual foundations as in its practical applications.²⁷ Against an abstract, often just declamatory, cosmopolitanism, the philosophy of human rights must take into account the cultural, geographical and historical volatility of what it means “being human”, where empirical and historical contingency and the need for political-philosophical mediation meet. In this respect, my interpretation could provide some helpful clues, according to which the discourse on human rights is located precisely where practical-political action and the cultural-conceptual question on being human and human freedom meet, which corresponds to Hegel’s placing world history in the transition from the objective to the absolute spirit. An obvious difference, of course, is that, unlike in Hegel’s time, there are supranational political institutions today that are responsible for international affairs as well as for the implementation and protection of human rights. It is precisely in the design and development of such institutions that a collision between state sovereignty and global justice arises and needs a constant reflective mediation between different instances, as well as between universal human rights and local interests or value systems. Such a constant process of mediation and adaptation must be conceptually and discursively framed, along the lines of Hegel’s “philosophical” pattern, whereas pre- or post-conceptual approaches to the actualization of the principle of the subject’s freedom are instead simply inadequate, as their reflective potential is essentially limited, as the case of tragedy and its inadequacy in the modern world illustrates. The alternative option to a global relapse into the tragic – a dead-end, meaningless one, this time – is the prose of the concept, and Antigone’s legacy is still the “hard work of Science” (PhS, 48).

Notes

1 For a broader discussion, see Siani 2018a.

2 Sophocles’ work was highly valued by Hegel, not only in the context of his aesthetics, but also in the context of phenomenology, the philosophy of law,

the philosophy of history, the philosophy of religion, and even the philosophy of language. Hegel, who had translated *Antigone* from the Greek in his early years, later refers to it as the “most perfect work of art” (ÄH, 306). Conversely, his interpretation of the work is one of the best-known interpretations of a tragedy of all time. Since I am pursuing a philosophical-systematic aim, the question of the adequacy of Hegel’s interpretation of tragedy in general and *Antigone* in particular is irrelevant here. See, among others, Pöggeler 1973; Houlgate 2007; Iannelli 2006. On Hegel’s concept of tragedy in general, see my introductory work in Siani 2014a. I should also mention that Hegel’s interpretation of *Antigone* has been influential on and quite divisive in the debates on feminist philosophy (see, among others, Butler 2002; Ferrini 2002).

- 3 Hegel’s interpretation of the tragic collision and justice in *Antigone* is beautifully summarized in this passage from the lectures on the philosophy of religion: “The collision of the two highest ethical powers against each other is plastically presented in the absolute example of tragedy, *Antigone*; there, family love, the sacred, inner, what belongs to sentiment, which is why it is also called the law of the lower gods, comes into collision with the law of the state. Creon is not a tyrant but is also an ethical power. Creon is not wrong; he claims that the law of the state, the authority of the government, must be respected and that punishment follows from violation. Each of these two sides realises only one of the ethical powers, has only one of them as its content. This is the unilaterality, and the meaning of eternal justice is that both attain injustice because they are unilateral, but with it both attain right. Both are recognised as valid in the untroubled course of ethical life; here they both have their validity, but their balanced validity. It is only the unilaterality, that against which justice stands up” (R, 132).
- 4 Since I will consider these two texts only in terms of Hegel’s theory of tragedy, I will disregard their different aims and methods. Needless to say, I will only be able to offer a rather simplified version of Hegel’s complex argument. Here, it should only be noted in passing that tragedy was indeed central also for the young Hegel, but as a rather optimistic paradigm of ethical conciliation, hinged on Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*. From the *Phenomenology* onwards, the element of instability and conflict comes to the fore. The idea of reconciliation through tragedy is retained, but the focus is now shifted to its inadequacy and, correspondingly, Sophocles’ *Antigone* (i.e. a less archaic and more complex work) takes the place of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* as a philosophically exemplary drama. Overcoming the rather classicistic view of the early years, Hegel still presents Greek ethical life as immediate and compact, but at the same time as doomed from the start, being structured around the tragic conflict in which the modern form of subjectivity has its roots. For a broader reconstruction see, among others, Siani 2021; Olivier 2008, 68, which highlights Hegel’s proximity to Hölderlin.
- 5 See Düsing 1988, 71.
- 6 See, in this context, the very interesting reading focused on the link between tragedy, agency, and retrospectivity, by Speight 2009, chapter 2 (dedicated to Hegel’s *Antigone*).
- 7 See Chapter 2 of this book.
- 8 In this part of my argument, I broadly rely on Menke 1996, esp. 85–93.
- 9 “The chorus [represents] the quiet condition, living an undisturbed ethical life and fearing the division of the ethical powers, remaining neutral for itself. The second side of the ethical consciousness emerges into a particular shape and hence with mutual hostility” (ÄH, 303).

- 10 See also R, 131–132: “Fate [*Fatum*] is the absence of concept, where justice and injustice disappear into abstraction; in tragedy, however, destiny [*Schicksal*] is within a circle of ethical justice. We find this in the most sublime way in the Sophoclean tragedies. There, . . . the destiny of the individuals is represented as something incomprehensible, but the necessity is not blind, it is rather recognised as the true justice. Thus those tragedies are the immortal spiritual works of ethical understanding and comprehension, the eternal pattern of the ethical concept. Blind fate is something unsatisfactory. In these tragedies justice is comprehended”.
- 11 A discussion of the Roman world and the *Rechtszustand* as a link between the classical Greek and Christian modern worlds must be omitted here.
- 12 See Siani 2019a, 2021.
- 13 “The interpreting comprehension of tragic destiny as a movement of justice, which both poet and spectator learn through tragedy, is nothing other than the (ethical) comprehension of justice – the theatre-going is at the same time government participation” (Menke 1996, 107).
- 14 See in this regard the stimulating reading by Westphal 2003, chapters 3–4, arguing that *Antigone* is a foregoer of Hegel’s phenomenological method of inner critique, self-reflection, and self-understanding.
- 15 Whereby, however, “there is a difference between private revenge and the revenge of heroes, knights-errant, etc., which is part of the founding of states” (PhR, 106).
- 16 “It is part of education, of thinking as the consciousness of the individual in the form of universality, that the I comes to be apprehended as a universal person in which all are identical. A human being counts as a human being in virtue of his *humanity*, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian, etc. This consciousness, for which *thought* is what is valid, is of infinite importance” (PhR, 198).
- 17 The internalisation of external determinations in the subject or the becoming of the substance into the subject through the internalisation of external determinations is the systematic-methodological core, here. Through this process of internalisation, the subject comes to consciousness and to the truth of itself, or the concept is realized. Accordingly, those determinations are no longer grasped as an abstract external necessity, but as a concrete internal freedom. This process, which has its groundwork in the equivalence of subjective logic and the logic of the concept in the *Science of Logic* and which pervades the whole of Hegel’s philosophy, is connected with the process of recollection/reconstruction of what the spirit in its development has externalised, in Hegel’s terms: *Erinnerung*.
- 18 On Hegel and Shakespeare, see first Kottman 2018.
- 19 See Weisser-Lohmann 2005a.
- 20 See Gethmann-Siefert 2005, 330 ff.
- 21 See Schmidt 1999, esp. 312–313.
- 22 See Rawls 1999, 5–7. The reference to the later Rawls is not random: I believe that his “political turn” should also be understood as a progressive distancing from a Kantian pattern toward a Hegelian one (see Siani 2019b).
- 23 See however Schmidt 1999; Buchwalter 2013; Vieweg 2012, 462–464.
- 24 In Siani 2014b, I have offered a much broader and more developed version of these final arguments, presented here only as an outline.
- 25 My idea of a possible return of the tragic at a global level is thus rather different from Menke 1996’s thesis of the return of the tragic in modernity in the

form of a constantly looming incompatibility between the actualisation of the universal and individual self-realization or longing for authenticity, a thesis I do not share, on Hegelian grounds: see also Siani 2021, 171–172.

- 26 In one of the aforementioned passages, Hegel makes it clear that the rejection of an abstract cosmopolitanism not only does not contradict the global actualization of the principle of subjective freedom, but is even necessary to it: “A human being counts as a human being in virtue of his *humanity*, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian, etc. This consciousness, for which *thought* is what is valid, is of infinite importance. It is defective only when it becomes fixed – e.g., as cosmopolitanism – in opposition to the concrete life of the state” (PhR, 198).
- 27 Again, for a development of this aspect in particular and for a broader theoretical discussion of the approach I suggest, even beyond Hegel, I have to refer to Siani 2014b.

6 Croce and Gramsci (and Gentile) on Hegel's Dialectics and the Death of Art

Having defended and developed the idea of a “present” of art’s past character in a mainly Hegel-immanent way, I am now going to take my argument beyond Hegel. This and the next chapter will discuss two independent interpretations of the thesis of art’s past character that overtly plead to overcome it. I will then critically contrast such reinterpretations not just with Hegel, but with authors who are not directly or mainly inspired by him, putting the thesis to the test of time so as to show the resilience and attractiveness of its core tenets even when disjoined from Hegel himself. In this chapter, I am going to discuss Croce’s peculiar Hegelianism together with his head-on criticism of the thesis, considered Hegel’s fatal error and directly leading Croce himself to work out his system of “distincts”, as a correction of Hegelian dialectics. I will then contrast Croce’s views of art with Gramsci’s, and very briefly, in the conclusion, with Gentile’s too, showing how the evaluation of dialectics is structurally linked to their notions of nature and the place of art. The chapter will therefore begin with an overview of the way Croce’s critique of Hegelian dialectics is motivated, among other things, precisely by the need to avoid the thesis, as Croce puts it, of the “death of art” (1): the introduction of the category of “distinction” provides the theoretical basis for preserving the historical-conceptual independence of art from philosophy (2). Gramsci, on the contrary, criticizes Croce’s neutralization of Hegelian dialectics, reduced to a “scholastic matter of words”, to a superstructure uprooted from the structure (3), and he does so by attacking Croce’s concept of art as a pure mental content, separated from the contradictions of historical, material, and conceptual reality. This will show how Croce’s “revisionism” vis-à-vis Hegel’s thesis of art’s past character raises original, formidable philosophical objections, but ultimately risks turning art into something abstract and insubstantial, as Gramsci points out, positioning himself, albeit implicitly, closer to Hegel’s view of the relationship between art and philosophy (4). To further complicate the picture and let the topicality of Hegel’s thesis emerge in all its seriousness and ramifications, the chapter ends with a

cursory reference to Gentile's position (5), insisting on the radical, irreconcilable opposition of the three views of art, philosophy, Hegelian dialectics, and politics.¹

Croce on Hegel's Dialectics

While it is true that Hegel does not play a direct leading role in Croce's aesthetics (and that, more in general, Croce's characterization as a Neo-Hegelian is inaccurate),² it is certainly true that aesthetics plays a prominent role in Croce's deep and extensive confrontation with Hegel. As a matter of fact, it could be suggested that Croce's critique of Hegel's aesthetics is the original core of the more general critique Croce makes of Hegel's philosophy, despite Croce presenting the former critique as a derivative of the latter. As is well known, both Croce's appreciation and critique of Hegel have to do, in the first place, with dialectics.³ Croce acknowledges Hegel as having solved one (if not the) fundamental problem of philosophy, the one that threatened "philosophy itself, the whole philosophy, . . . with failure";⁴ that is, the problem of the "opposites".⁵ The systematic core of Croce's philosophy, however, is the difference between "opposites" and "distincts", which he developed in contrast with Hegel. Distincts are philosophical moments that, while different from each other, are unified as particular distinct forms of the one and only spirit. The exemplary, fundamental case is that of the distinction between fantasy and intellect, which are distinct but mutually communicating forms in which the spirit is present at all times: they are not separate "like two entities each closed in itself and foreign to each other, but the one passes over into the other, so that fantasy . . . however distinct from intellect, is the fundament of intellect, necessary to the latter".⁶ Despite their non-unity, the existence of distinctions, therefore, does not jeopardize "the concrete unity of the philosophical concept"⁷ or philosophy as such.

Opposites, on the contrary, are contrasting concepts that are inevitably mutually exclusive, such as being and non-being, true and false, good and evil, and beautiful and ugly. Confronted with them,

Instead of the concrete universal, . . . thought looks like bumping everywhere into two universals: the one facing the other, the one threatening the other. The completion of philosophy is hence hindered, and since an activity that cannot accomplish its completion shows thereby to have set itself an absurd goal, philosophy itself, the whole philosophy, is threatened with failure.⁸

Neither abstract monism, which simply strives in vain to reduce one element of each pair of opposites to a mere illusion, nor dualistic systems can

answer the problem of opposites. Instead, it is Hegel who finds the obvious yet brilliant solution:

The opposites are not an illusion and the unity is not an illusion. Opposites are opposite toward each other, but not toward unity, as true and concrete unity is nothing else but the unity, or synthesis, of opposites. It is not immobility, but movement; not stationariness, but development.⁹

The Hegelian doctrine of opposites is precisely dialectics, which reveals that opposites do not exist per se, but are only abstract moments whose truth is in the third term, or synthesis, as shown, for example, by Hegel's "first triad"¹⁰ of being, noting, and becoming.

As we can see, Croce gives great credit to Hegel, a credit that nevertheless cannot be separated by its flipside, or Hegel's huge "error". In short, such error consists in the failure to separate opposites from distincts and to recognize that, while opposites are mere abstractions whose concrete reality is only given in the unity of the synthesis, distincts are concrete concepts that are in a relationship of implication with each other, as degrees of spirit and reality.¹¹ Croce clarifies this point, not by chance, through the case "of art and philosophy (or poetry and prose, language and logic, intuition and thought)".¹² Art and philosophy are respectively the lower and the higher degree of spirit, in its theoretical form. To say that they are in a relationship of implication means that "art does not exclude philosophy, but philosophy even includes art".¹³ While art can exist without philosophy and intuition without concept, the reverse is not true: philosophy and concept imply, and necessarily so, art and intuition, respectively. Theirs is therefore a relationship of degrees or distincts, not a dialectical one of opposites. This means that the transition from one degree to another is not dictated by a contradiction in the lower degree that the higher degree must solve, but by the movement of the spirit that incessantly passes from one to the other and *is*, more precisely, the one and the other: "Universal spirit passes from *a* to *b*, and from *b* to *a*, for no other necessity than its own nature, which is being together art and philosophy, theory and praxis".¹⁴ Therefore, between the distinct degrees, there is no contradiction or transition in the sense of Hegel's *Aufhebung*, but "*an eternal passing, which . . . is a being*".¹⁵

Hegel's main error was then his failure to distinguish between opposites and distincts and, more precisely, to conceive "the nexus of the [distinct] degrees dialectically, after the fashion of the dialectics of the opposites".¹⁶ Such error has two fatal consequences:

On the one hand, mere *philosophical errors* started acquiring the dignity of partial or particular concepts, i.e. of *distinct concepts*. On the

other hand, actual *distinct concepts* were reduced . . . to incomplete and imperfect truths, i.e. they took on the appearance of *philosophical errors*.¹⁷

If the first consequence affected the structure of Hegelian logic and system as a whole, with its arbitrariness and systematic stretches, “the latter determined the character of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*”,¹⁸ which we are now going to address.

The “Death of Art”

The systematic positioning of art as the first form of absolute spirit and Hegel’s view of its function and nature are, for Croce, a direct consequence “of the conflation between synthesis of the opposites and relationship of the distincts”.¹⁹ Because of such conflation, Hegel disregards the proper value and independence of art. Instead of considering art and philosophy as distinct forms of the spirit in a relationship of mutual implication, Hegel considers them opposites in a dialectical relationship, whereby philosophy is the truth of art, and art is reduced to an imperfect spiritual form and a philosophical error. In other words, Hegel is unable to conceive that perfectly simple and unreflective theoretical form that is intuition (i.e. art) in its independence and distinctiveness. On the contrary, since he refers to the highest form of the spirit, that is, the philosophical concept, as his only model and term of comparison, every other distinct form is conceived merely as a provisional and insufficient version of the latter. Thus, Croce adds, even the form presented as the simplest of all in the *Phenomenology*, that is, sense-certainty, is not the first theoretical form in the sense of a “pure and simple” *aisthesis*,²⁰ but “is already mixed with intellectual reflection, it already contains the question on what is truly actual”.²¹ In other words, Hegel seems incapable of separating what for Croce is the authentic sense-certainty, that is, intuition/art, but he conceives of it in the role that the philosophical concept should have instead, with respect to which intuition/art is glaringly and inevitably inadequate. For Croce, though, such inadequacy is not motivated by the fact that intuition/art is a provisional theoretical form bound to be surpassed by representation/religion and then by thought/philosophy, as in Hegel, but by the fact that its role is structurally different, that is, being

intuition, without intellectual references. It is the quiver a poem communicates to us, and thanks to which a vision of reality is opened to us that cannot be conveyed in intellectual terms and that we do not possess unless we sing it, or re-sing it, i.e. form it.²²

Unable to recognize art's rightful place and independence, Hegel ends up following in the footsteps of the prevailing positions of the Romantic age, from Kant to Schopenhauer via Schiller and Schelling, and for him art becomes "a way to know the Absolute, to solve the great philosophical problem".²³ A particularly relevant implication for Croce's criticism is that the history of art as discussed in Hegel's lectures becomes "history of human ideals, in which the individuality of the artworks, i.e. their truly aesthetic form, is pushed into the background".²⁴ On the contrary, Croce has a radically "individualistic"²⁵ view of the work of art, in the sense that one cannot make art history except as a succession of works and authors taken in their individuality. For Hegel, on the other hand, art history, deprived – according to Croce's reading – of all its independence and distinctiveness, is nothing more than a piece of the overall (and universal) history through which consciousness reaches the absolute. Since art, as such, can only grasp the absolute "in sensible and immediate form, whereas philosophy grasps it through the pure element of thought",²⁶ it is clear that, more precisely, for Hegel, the history of art ends up being the history of the overcoming of art, first in religion, then in philosophy.

This leads Croce to deal with the greatest outrage in Hegel's aesthetics, that is precisely the past character of art, which Croce dramatically refers to as the "death of art"²⁷: "When philosophy is completely unfolded, art must disappear as superfluous: art must die and, in fact, it is already dead and gone".²⁸ The idea of an art that, through its history, leads to the death of the artistic form itself is, for Croce, a "grand paradox illuminating Hegel's aesthetic error in all its contours and clarifying, probably better than any other example, the error of its own logical presupposition".²⁹ Croce, furthermore, highlights that Hegel's thesis does not imply art's death in the "weak", metaphysical sense of an "eternal dying that is an eternal being reborn"³⁰: it is in fact "*a death of art in the historical world*",³¹ a strong thesis that at the same time is fully consistent with the Hegelian system and fully unacceptable. For Croce, as we have seen, art and philosophy are two distinct and independent *a priori* spiritual forms, bound together in a relationship of mutual implication whereby philosophy cannot be without art, but not the other way around. In this way, the possibility of a progression from art to philosophy, and thus of the death of art, is completely uprooted.³² Such removal is, in turn, a reflection of Croce's concern for safeguarding the absolutely individual, non- (or pre-) conceptual, and non-practical nature of art.

In the name of that concern, Croce, as is well known, defends, on the one hand, the idea that the properly aesthetic dimension of art (what makes art what it is) is entirely resolved in intuition-expression, that is, in a purely mental fact, while all the material and historical aspects, what makes the *work* of art, have a merely practical nature and role (i.e. they fall under the

practical “distincts”). On the other hand, Croce rejects the idea of a (inadequately) conceptual nature of art and, in this way, art proper is in fact separated from the distinct of the concept and the universal, and cannot therefore be explained – as Hegel does – on the basis of the required conceptualization or universalization, which would eventually make it look like just an imperfect form of philosophy and as such bound to be surpassed. Thus, Croce radically separates art both from the practical sphere, from which it differs because of its purely intuitive and theoretical nature, and from the other theoretical form that is philosophy, from which it departs because of its non-conceptuality and non-universality. In turn, both these sides of Croce’s argument, that is, the critique of Hegel’s dialectics and the critique of Hegel’s view of art, become the target of Gramsci’s criticism, who sides with Hegel and against Croce, explicitly as to the first side, and implicitly, as I will argue, as to the second one.

Gramsci, Dante’s *Inferno*, and Catharsis

Gramsci’s critique hinges on Croce’s removal of the Hegelian forms of absolute spirit from the dialectical movement, which is given only between opposites, not between distincts, as art and philosophy are in Croce. Gramsci objects that, if distincts are excluded from dialectics, this means, firstly, that they are excluded from the historicity of contradiction and, secondly, that theory and praxis are distinct from and independent of each other, with philosophical and political consequences that are unacceptable from his perspective. The interpretation of Hegel’s dialectics and its political consequences are at the heart of the criticism of speculative idealism and the reactionary neutralization of conflict explicitly made by Gramsci to Croce. Indeed, Gramsci suggests that “the movement from Hegel to Croce-Gentile . . . has been a step backward, a ‘reactionary’ reform”³³ with respect to an authentically historicist, realist, and immanentist thought, to which Gramsci’s own philosophy of praxis tends and for which Hegel constituted the speculative groundwork.³⁴ Compared to Hegel’s version, Croce’s reform takes the form of a reduction in purely speculative terms, as it separates historical becoming from the concept of becoming (so that history becomes merely the history of concepts) and the practical moment of politics from the theoretical moment of philosophy and history.

Gramsci’s judgement, though continually reshaped over the years and despite the accolades paid to Croce, whose influence on him is essential, is stark:

That Hegelian dialectics was a reflection of great historical knots and that dialectics, from an expression of social contradictions, should become, with the disappearance of such contradictions, a pure conceptual

dialectics, can be seen as the basis of the latest utopian philosophies such as Croce's.³⁵

Croce's interpretation of Hegelian dialectics has "deprived the latter of all vigour and greatness, making it a scholastic matter of words".³⁶ Put otherwise, while the Hegelian dialectics reflects the historicity and conflict of the real world and the spiritual forms that interpret it, Croce's reform ends up producing spiritual forms that are separate from that historicity and conflict, concepts that seem to have a life of their own, uprooted as they are from reality and its contradictions, making room, in a pejorative sense, for an "idealistic" and conservative utopia. The result is the neutralization of the spiritual forms, which, instead of confronting the contradictions of reality, take refuge in a sterile game of shadows.³⁷

Through his critique of Croce's reform of Hegelian dialectics, Gramsci addresses the more general issue of the relationship between the economic-productive base or structure and the cultural-ideological superstructure.³⁸ He opposes Croce's uprooting of cultural facts as purely theoretical from the world of political-economic passion and action, as if they were conceptual universals devoid of particularity, materiality, and historicity. To Croce's distinction, Gramsci opposes the claim of the political nature of philosophy and of the ideological character of all forms of knowledge. Here, we cannot possibly engage in an in-depth discussion of this issue.³⁹ The most interesting point for us is that Gramsci's criticism of Croce and his own position emerge most poignantly not in the context of a reflection on economics or politics, but in the interpretation of a work of art and, more specifically, Gramsci's famous reading of Canto 10 of Dante's *Inferno*.⁴⁰ The reflection on art substantiates and defines Gramsci's philosophical point of view and the political motive behind it, and makes it possible to operatively observe his opposition to Croce.

In fact, Gramsci does not start off with Croce, but with Francesco De Sanctis, the literary critic, who "noticed the unevenness contained in the Canto because of the fact that Farinata suddenly changes character: after being *poetry* he becomes *structure*".⁴¹ In other words, in Croce's terms, there is a tension in the Canto, because at first Farinata is pure "poetic" expression, while at the end of the story, his character is only instrumental to the clarification of that blend of political, historical, and cultural aspects and ideas that make up the "structure", the foundation on which poetic expression grows. For Gramsci, this is a one-sided and unsatisfactory reading: "Nobody has observed that if one does not consider Cavalcante's drama, . . . one does not see the damned's torment *in action*: the *structure* should have led to a more precise aesthetic evaluation of the Canto, as every punishment is represented in action".⁴² At first sight, it may seem surprising that for Gramsci, the central drama is not the "political" one of Farinata, but the "human" one of Cavalcante. It is only in the latter, however, that one sees the punishment, and thus the suffering, in action: that

of knowing the past and the future, but not the present. It is Cavalcante, not Farinata, who stages the drama of the damned of the circle, and yet – Gramsci observes – this drama is not directly represented by Dante: “He gives the reader the element to reconstruct the drama, and such elements are provided by the structure”.⁴³ In other words, the structure (i.e. the direct representation of Farinata’s character in its didactic and pedagogical role) makes the poetic moment possible: it is only on the basis of what Farinata explains that Cavalcante’s drama takes shape, albeit negatively, that is, as unexpressed and inexpressible: “Dante does not interrogate Farinata only to ‘learn’, he interrogates him because he was struck by Cavalcante’s disappearance”.⁴⁴ Therefore, “the structural piece is not just structure, but also poetry: it is a necessary element of the drama unfolded”.⁴⁵ The more general conclusion Gramsci draws directly involves Croce: “This interpretation vitally damages Croce’s thesis on the poetry and the structure of the *Commedia*. Without doubt also the structure of the work has the value of poetry. . . . Remove this and poetry disappears”.⁴⁶ It is not possible, for Gramsci, to distinguish as Croce does between structure and poetry, precisely because structure has the value of poetry.

It might feel as if Gramsci, in keeping with Marxist materialism, opted, against Croce, to resolve poetry, and more generally any superstructure, into structure. Things, however, are more complex than that. As we have seen, although structure itself is poetry, the actual aesthetic element cannot be said to be entirely resolved in it. Art is made possible by structure, that is, by the text as such, but it is not identified with it; rather, it is what is not directly expressed by the text itself, although it is not possible without it. This is where Gramsci’s concept of catharsis comes into play. In the Canto under examination, the catharsis originates from one single word, namely the “had” (*ebbe*) uttered by Dante, a simple past tense that suggests to Cavalcante that Guido, his son, is dead:

The “aesthetic” and “dramatic” accent of the verse falls on “had” and this is the origin of Cavalcante’s drama, interpreted in Farinata’s taglines, and there is the “catharsis”. Dante corrects himself and removes Cavalcante from the punishment, that is he interrupts his punishment in *action*.⁴⁷

Like the other pivotal terms and concepts of Gramsci’s confrontation with Croce in Canto 10 of the *Inferno*, that of catharsis actually has a much broader philosophical significance than that of a merely literary interpretive tool. In fact, it explicitly acts as the keystone of the relationship between structure and superstructure and the starting point of the entire philosophy of praxis:

One can employ the term “catharsis” to denote the transition from the merely economic (or selfish-passionate) moment to the ethical-political moment, i.e. the superior elaboration of structure into superstructure in

human consciousness. This also means the transition from the “objective to the subjective” and from “necessity to freedom”. From being an external force that crushes man, assimilates him to itself, makes him passive, the structure is transformed into a means for freedom, into a tool for creating a new ethical-political form, into the source of new initiatives.⁴⁸

The catharsis is thus interpreted as a moment of transition from the structure to the superstructure, from the objective to the subjective, and from necessity to freedom. That is, it is the point where the objective and material coercion of the merely economic moment (the structure) becomes part of human consciousness and freedom (the superstructure), so that the latter is reconciled with the former, not in the sense of a quiet settlement, but as a transformation of reality. Therefore, “the setting of the ‘cathartic’ moment becomes . . . the starting point for the whole philosophy of praxis; the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses that are the result of the dialectic development”.⁴⁹

Art, History, Politics: Return to Hegel

It is easy to see how, for Gramsci, catharsis becomes a central concept in history, without, however, losing its original aesthetic dimension, as shown by the decisive centrality of the term in the reading of Canto 10. More precisely, the originally purely artistic notion of catharsis is universalized in the philosophical reflection on it. Art, therefore, has value and meaning for Gramsci, not as a distinct, independent, non-historical, and non-conceptual theoretical form (as in Croce), but, on the contrary, as an objective phenomenon, socially and historically constituted and significant, and therefore as the carrier of a potentially universal value, which must, however, be philosophically and politically addressed and deciphered. Against Croce,

the artist . . . does not write or paint, etc., i.e. he does not “mark” exteriorly his fantasies just for “his own remembrance”, to be able to relive the instant of creation, but he is artist only insofar as he “marks” exteriorly, objectivizes, historicizes his phantasies,

and the fundamental degeneration of art, determined by Croce’s aesthetics, is the “artistic expressive anti-historical (or anti-social or anti-national-popular) ‘individualism’ ”.⁵⁰ Precisely on the basis of his anti-Crocian reading of art as a historical, social, and objective phenomenon, Gramsci then broadens his criticism of Croce’s concept of history and historicism.⁵¹ Starting with his reduction of history to art, Croce reduces history to ethical-political history, that is, to

an arbitrary and mechanical hypostasis of the moment of hegemony, of political direction, of consent, in the life and development of the

activity of the state and civil society. This Crocian setting of the historiographical problem reproduces his setting of the aesthetic one; the ethical-political moment is for history what the moment of the “form” is for art: it is the “lyricism” of history, the “catharsis” of history.⁵²

Croce, in short, reduced his theory of historical-political change to his aesthetic concept:⁵³ actions, passions, conflicts, and their material roots to mental images and fantasy.

Here, however, from the more general and explicit criticism a new point emerges, which is seemingly more marginal and implicit, namely the specific difference between history and art:

Things are not so simple in history as in art. In art, the production of “lyricism” is perfectly identified in an individualised cultural world, in which the identification of content and form and the so-called dialectics of the distincts in the unity of the spirit can be admitted. . . . But in history and the production of history, the “individualised” representation of states and nations is a mere metaphor. The “distinctions” that must be made in such representations are not and cannot be presented “speculatively” on pain of falling into a new form of rhetoric.⁵⁴

On the one hand, in art, one can still hold firm to the idea of a dialectics of distincts⁵⁵ within the unity of the spirit, on the basis of which individualities (the works) are given and can be thought of as parts of a given universal. On the other hand, in history and politics, this is not possible, because every conceptual distinction ends up being merely metaphorical, and it would be dangerous as well as wrong to superimpose such metaphor on the material reality of contradiction. Thus, the problem is not just that Croce has generally conceived of spiritual forms (and art in particular) as free and independent of the structural processes: there is also a specific problem in the conflation of the historiographical and the aesthetic approach. Art is in itself, Gramsci suggests, an inadequate model for reading and interpreting history and politics:

For the politician, every a priori “fixed” image is reactionary: the politician considers all movement in its becoming. The artist, on the other hand, must have images “fixed” and cast in their final form. The politician imagines the human being as he is and at the same time as he should be in order to achieve a given end; his work consists precisely in leading men to move, to come out of their present being in order to become collectively capable of achieving the proposed end, that is, to “conform” to the end. The artist necessarily represents “what is” at a certain moment . . . , realistically. Therefore, from a political point of view, the politician will never be happy with the artist and cannot be: he will always find him

behind the times, always anachronistic, always outdated by the real movement.⁵⁶

Art then seems to be *in itself*, beyond Croce's degeneration, something static and anachronistic, as opposed to politics and history as movement and as an ever-changing progress towards an end. This view, despite appearances, does not contradict the centrality and value of Gramsci's reflections on art, literature, and poetry. The point, on the contrary, is that artistic practice as such is insufficient and inadequate to interpret, express, and convey "the proposed end" and the movement leading to it; whereas, on the other hand, reflection on art is part of a philosophical knowledge that is, for all intents and purposes, political and ideological.⁵⁷ This is indeed another facet of Gramsci's critique of Croce's idea of art as a form of the spirit that is independent and distinct from history, politics, and philosophy. For Gramsci, art is certainly a central element in the life and culture of a people, but this is precisely because it is inseparable from its practical and material conditions as well as from the need for its conceptual reframing and mobilization.

In an implicit manner, the polemical circle drawn by Gramsci seems to end with a return to Hegel and the "death" of art, that is, to the notion of art as, firstly, an inadequate paradigm, insofar as it is static and not progressive with respect to historical-political action and, secondly, as a non-self-sufficient historical-social phenomenon, which finds its fullest truth in philosophical conceptualization. Such a conclusion would have to be properly expatiated upon and defended, not only because of the fragmentary and implicit nature of Gramsci's references to Hegel but also because of the differences that separate the two authors, first and foremost the absence, in Gramsci, of a philosophy of history to which, as in Hegel, the relationship between art and philosophy is tied up. However, given the tight link established by Croce between Hegelian dialectics and aesthetics and, more specifically, between the conflation of distincts and opposites and the thesis of the death of art, it can be at least reasonably argued that Gramsci's "restoration" of Hegelian dialectics against Croce implies a closeness to Hegel as to the relationship between art and philosophy as well, as Gramsci's reference to Hegel as to the actual source of his own philosophy of praxis can be viewed as an overall anti-Crocian pattern too.

Irreconcilable Worlds: Gentile's Take

To conclude, and to further complicate the picture, one cannot but bring Gentile into the equation too (though so very briefly). The whole last chapter of his *Philosophy of Art* (called "Immortal Art") deals with the end of

art, about which he adopts a violently anti-Crocian standpoint, by criticizing, among other things, Croce's "strong" historical reading. For Gentile, himself a "reformer" of Hegelian dialectics who, not unlike Gramsci, wanted to stress his closeness to Hegel in an anti-Crocian role, this is a symptom of Croce's failure to concretely appreciate Hegel's dialectical idealism, in which no moment of the spirit can actually "die" and be done with. For Gentile, art is an eternal form of the spirit, as such eternally and ideally being reborn and "passing" through, and the end of art is a transcendental, ideal, and eternal end, in the pursuit of which art in fact never dies: "In this end, which is not the end, is the joy of the circle closing itself, the artistic moment returning, the catharsis immanent to the synthesis of the spirit",⁵⁸ where the use of the concept of "catharsis", as in Gramsci, stands out. Speaking of a strong, historical interpretation of the thesis and attributing it to Hegel is something "possible only for an abstract and anti-dialectical philosophizing about art".⁵⁹ Croce, as we saw, decidedly rejects the non-historical, "weak" sense of Hegel's thesis, and there are reasons to suppose that his apparently "unfair" criticism, in this regard, of Bosanquet (already dead and anyway definitely an "unsubstantial" target for someone like Croce) is indeed directed against Gentile, a much more threatening advocate of a very similar reading.⁶⁰

As for Gramsci, despite his shared criticism of Croce, partly pursued by taking a Hegelian standpoint, nothing could obviously be further from him than the philosophical, political, *and* aesthetic idealistic voluntarism of the official philosopher of fascism, for whom the groundwork of all philosophy (and reality) is the infinite, quasi-heroic effort of (self-)actualization of an ideal super-subject. The three positions, though more or less unintentionally overlapping every now and then, are simply irreconcilable and structurally at odds with each other. The clash/dialogue between the three concepts of art, associated with radically divergent philosophical worldviews, appropriations of Hegel, and political theories (liberalism, Marxism, fascism), in a dramatic moment in Italian and European history, is yet another pattern and further evidence of the relevance and soundness of the thesis of art's past character.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a reworking of my chapter in Italian "Croce e Gramsci su dialettica e arte in Hegel", in *Effetto Hegel. Filosofia, arte, società*. Ed. F.M. Cacciatore, F. Lesce. Napoli: Guida, 2020, 271–286.
- 2 See, for example, D'Angelo 2007, 15.
- 3 Croce's self-aware and fundamental duplicity towards Hegel is plastically captured in the iconic title of his 1907 essay, *What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel* (Croce 1995). For an overall evaluation, see Bellamy 1984, which does not, however, place due emphasis on the issue of art.

- 4 Croce 1995, 34.
- 5 Croce 1995, 33.
- 6 Croce 1995, 33. The example is not randomly chosen, because the distinction between imagination and intellect underlies the distinction between art and philosophy, which, as we shall see, is one of Croce's central concerns.
- 7 Croce 1995, 33.
- 8 Croce 1995, 33.
- 9 Croce 1995, 37.
- 10 Croce 1995, 39.
- 11 Cfr. Croce 1995, 68.
- 12 Croce 1995, 69–70.
- 13 Croce 1995, 70.
- 14 Croce 1995, 72.
- 15 Croce 1995, 72.
- 16 Croce 1995, 73.
- 17 Croce 1995, 75.
- 18 Croce 1995, 75.
- 19 Croce 1995, 84.
- 20 Croce 1995, 85.
- 21 Croce 1995, 85.
- 22 Croce 1995, 85–86. Here, I may only briefly point out how, consistently with the Crocian system, the same criticisms levelled at the Hegelian concept of art also apply to that of language.
- 23 Croce 1995, 87.
- 24 Croce 1995, 88.
- 25 He refers to his own doctrine as “looking even anarchic or anarchoid, rather than liberal” (Croce 1990, 73). Croce's aesthetic and, of course, political-historical individualism and liberalism will be the target, as we will see, of Gramsci's criticism.
- 26 Croce 1995, 88.
- 27 Croce consistently uses the term “death of art” (*morte dell'arte*), instead of “end of art”, a choice still reflected in the common usage of Italian in our days. See already the critique by Bosanquet 1919.
- 28 Croce 1995, 88.
- 29 Croce 1995, 88.
- 30 Croce 1995, 88. This is Bosanquet's own thesis, which Croce strongly criticizes (but, on this point, see the conclusion of this chapter). As it is clear from my argument in the previous chapters, I agree with Croce's underscoring of the historical – beyond the metaphysical/systematic – sense of art's past character, and I am generally sympathetic with his criticism, which however exposes itself to fatal objections, as we will see while discussing Gramsci.
- 31 Croce 1995, 89.
- 32 “Croce had constructed the separation between opposites and distincts precisely to avoid certain consequences that he found unacceptable, including specifically the doctrine of the death of art” (D'Angelo 2016, 309).
- 33 Gramsci 1975, 2, 1317. On Gentile, see the conclusion of this chapter.
- 34 “Even with respect to Marx . . . , the idea that Hegel's thought constituted the speculative basis of the philosophy of praxis always remained firm in Gramsci” (Mustè 2018a, 33). Connected to this is the fact that Hegelian philosophy is, for Gramsci, heir to the progressive line of the French Revolution and Napoleon, whereas Croce explicitly placed himself in the “Italian line”, from Vico

- to Spaventa and Gioberti, a line that Gramsci blamed for being provincial and conservative: see Mustè 2018b, 276–277.
- 35 Gramsci 1975, 2, 886.
 - 36 Gramsci 1975, 2, 1326.
 - 37 “Just as Croce’s aesthetics is a theory of the primacy of form as a neutralisation of passions, so his historicism is a theory of the primacy of the ethical-political as a neutralisation of the political conflict rooted in social conflict” (Frosini 2003, 95).
 - 38 On Gramsci’s complex position, criticizing both extremes of deterministic mechanism and ideological voluntarism, and on his final relinquishment of the architectural metaphor, see the first chapter in Cospito 2016.
 - 39 For an in-depth study, in particular of the indispensable role of philosophy in relation to other ideological forms, with its consequences on Gramsci’s theory of intellectuals, see Frosini 2003, 170 ff.
 - 40 See, in general, Mustè 2017. Just as a reminder for readers: In Canto 10, Dante describes the Heretics, mostly epicureans who denied the existence of the soul and are tormented in open flaming tombs until the Day of Judgement, when the tombs will be closed forever, locking their re-embodied souls within. Among them, Dante meets and talks with Farinata degli Uberti, a political opponent, and Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti, father of Guido, a poet friend of Dante. Farinata is a famous leader of Florence’s Ghibellines, a mighty warrior, and a proud politician, portrayed as a hero, strong and brave even in the face of hell. Dante has a heated but respectful exchange of political views with Farinata who predicts his exile. Cavalcante, instead, is the picture of long-suffering fatherly love: he only asks why his son is not with Dante and regards the latter’s hesitation as meaning that Guido is dead. Dante’s hesitation was due instead to his dazzlement about the damned knowing the future (as shown by Farinata’s prediction): as Farinata explains, they can see into the future, albeit confusedly, but not into the present, so Cavalcante could not have known anything about his son’s life.
 - 41 Gramsci 1975, 1, 517. De Sanctis played an important role in Gramsci’s detachment from Croce.
 - 42 Gramsci 1975, 1, 517.
 - 43 Gramsci 1975, 1, 518.
 - 44 Gramsci 1975, 1, 518.
 - 45 Gramsci 1975, 1, 518.
 - 46 Gramsci 1975, 1, 528.
 - 47 Gramsci 1975, 1, 521.
 - 48 Gramsci 1975, 2, 1244.
 - 49 Gramsci 1975, 2, 1244.
 - 50 Gramsci 1975, 3, 1686–1687.
 - 51 On Gramsci’s reworking, or deconstruction, of Croce’s historicism, see first Frosini 2014.
 - 52 Gramsci 1975, 2, 1222. See Mustè 2018b, 255: “Croce had abused catharsis, treating history as art, and thus hypostatizing the moment of hegemony, depriving it of the roots and concrete nerves that come from the structure”.
 - 53 It is worth remembering that Croce’s first philosophical writing was the 1893 essay, *History Brought under the General Concept of Art*.
 - 54 Gramsci 1975, 2, 1222.
 - 55 It should be emphasized that the expression “dialectics of distincts” is technically inaccurate: dialectics only occurs between opposites.

56 Gramsci 1975, 3, 1820–1821.

57 On the (problematic) identification of historiography, philosophy, and politics, see also Mustè 2018b, 265–266.

58 Gentile 2003, 296.

59 Gentile 2003, 293.

60 This is the thesis in D’Angelo 2016, 307–308.

7 Subjects and Destinies of Poetry

Heidegger and Celan

After Croce and Gramsci, I will now turn to another philosopher who pleaded to overcome the thesis of art's past character (Heidegger) and to another author, this time a poet, who did not directly address such issue (nor Hegel's philosophy, for that matter) but still acted as a powerful critical counterbalance to that plead (Celan). The reference to Hegel's thesis and Heidegger's explicit discussion thereof (1) clarifies Heidegger's attempt to give a supreme veritative role back to art, and the "poetic antisubjectivism" such attempt entails (2). With a view to criticizing Heidegger's "destinal", and ultimately passivistic, reading of Hölderlin along with its ethical-political implications (3), the chapter will turn to Celan, to show how his *Meridian* speech, while sharing the Heideggerian concern for the unrestrained dominion of technology and the modern, "aesthetic" treatment of art (4), works out a powerful rejection of Heidegger's poetic antisubjectivism (5). The conclusion focuses on Celan's poem *Todtnauberg*, portraying his "failed" encounter with Heidegger in 1967, and draws a few broader conclusions on the consequences of the respective stances of the authors on poetry and subjectivity (6).

Heidegger on Hegel and Art

The background for the discussion of the "failed" encounter and in general the relationship between Heidegger and Celan, including all philosophical, artistic, historical, political, psychological, and so on, meanings attached to it, is Heidegger's decisive confrontation with poetry. It is well known that the aim of Heidegger's interpretation of poetry is not to contribute to literature studies or aesthetics. He states this explicitly in the Preface to his most important confrontation with poetry, namely, the *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, where he writes: "The present *Elucidations* do not claim to be contributions to research in the history of literature or to aesthetics. They spring from a necessity of thought".¹ Heidegger's objective is more radical than a philosophical interpretation of a work of art: "Each

time it is *we* who dispose over the poem as we will. But our task is the contrary: The poetry is to prevail over us, so that our Dasein becomes the living bearer of the power of this poetry".² The declared task of Heidegger's interpretation of poetry is to overturn the "aesthetic" power relationship between the subject and poetry. Instead of the subject arbitrarily disposing over poetry, poetry has to prevail over the subject. Heidegger does not present this goal as an original philosophical idea, but rather as an attempt to regain an original truth-bearing meaning of art, and of poetry in particular, against the modern subjectivist aesthetic conception, with important ethical-political implications.³ His interpretations of poetry can be read as the attempt to elucidate the conditions under which the Hegelian thesis of art's past character can be reversed and to contribute to such reversal.⁴ Despite their differences, Hegel and Heidegger generally agree on this: art can serve its highest purpose of embodying and transmitting an actual truth content only if the artist distances himself from his own ego, and lets instead the content shine through, or "happen", through his work, but without mixing or corrupting it with his own subjectivity. The substantial point of Heidegger's departure from Hegel is that Hegel believes that this highest, truth-bearing role of art is, irreversibly, a thing of the past, whereas Heidegger not only supports the reversibility of this thesis but even envisages the highest role of art as a future possibility, and in fact as a necessity of the time.⁵ At the core of such difference are their different understandings of truth. For Hegel, truth requires the subject's free, rational insight and acknowledgement, which can only be adequately achieved in a conceptual manner, making for a self-conscious and critical reconciliation with objectivity, while for Heidegger truth is a disclosure of being, irrespective of the rational will of the subject. In order to substantiate and develop this point, let me comment on Heidegger's direct reference to Hegel's thesis of the end of art in the Afterword of *The Origin of the Work of Art*.⁶

Heidegger reflects on the "deadly" consequences of the aesthetic-subjectivist treatment of art as an object and, more particularly, as an object of "experience": "Perhaps experience [*Erlebnis*] is the element in which art dies".⁷ Next are three quotes from Hegel on the end of art, followed by Heidegger's fundamental questioning of the thesis: "Is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is this something that art no longer is? But if art is that no longer, the question remains as to why this is so".⁸ The wording is dubitative, rather than assertive or critical, because

a decision concerning Hegel's judgment has not yet been made; for behind the judgment there stands Western thinking since the Greeks, a thinking which corresponds to a truth of beings that has already

happened. The decision about the judgment will be made, when it is made, from and about this truth of beings.⁹

While Hegel unconditionally supported the pastness of art, Heidegger reopens the question.¹⁰ At the same time, however, with an only *prima facie* surprising move, he confirms, for the time being, the soundness of Hegel's thesis: "Until then, the judgment remains in force".¹¹ "To the transformation of the essence of truth there corresponds the essential history of Western art"¹²: Hegel's judgement still applies today, insofar as we, based on that transformation, conceive of truth in an objectifying, scientific way, as "that which is assigned to knowledge and science as a quality to be distinguished from the beautiful and the good, terms which function as the values of non-theoretical activities".¹³ It is this modern scientific concept of truth that is reflected in Hegel's thesis, where truth and beauty belong to separate domains. This state of affairs is not irreversible: in fact, overcoming the modern subjectivist and objectifying concept of truth and opening the space for truth as unconcealment means *ipso facto* re-establishing the co-belonging of truth and beauty:

Truth is the unconcealment of beings as beings [*des Seienden als des Seienden*]. . . . Beauty does not occur alongside this truth. It appears when truth sets itself into the work. This appearing (as this being of truth in the work and as the work) is beauty. Thus beauty belongs to the advent of truth.¹⁴

Since the thesis of art's past character holds true unless we can gain access to a more originary concept of truth, by shifting our concept of truth we will shift the judgement about the pastness of art.

Revoking the End of Art?

Heidegger's interpretation of art, and in particular, as we shall see, of Hölderlin's poetry, entails precisely an attempt to make room for this different concept of truth: Hegel's thesis is certainly valid *now*, but it may be revoked in the future, that is, if the path pursued by Heidegger's thought is successful. Heidegger works towards falsifying the thesis by trying to restore a concept of truth that is antithetical to the current one, namely the one supporting Hegel's thesis. Heidegger's attempt can thus also be read as an attempt to restore the highest, original, truth-bearing function of art, not against Hegel as such, but rather by deconstructing the concept of truth underlying the Hegelian thesis.¹⁵ This confirms the aforementioned continuity between the two philosophers regarding the link between artistic antisubjectivism and the highest function of art, as well as their

discontinuity regarding the reversibility/irreversibility of the pastness of art. However, such discontinuity needs to be more accurately qualified. As a matter of fact, Heidegger clearly agrees with Hegel that, under the present conditions, that is, *under the conditions of modernity*, the pastness of art holds irreversibly. This is the needed qualification: for Heidegger, art's past character is reversible only on the condition that modernity itself may be, in a sense, reversed. That is: only if we gain access to a model of truth antithetical to the current subjectivist-scientific-objectifying one, can art's highest function be restored. Such reversal implies a reversal of the pivotal role of the right of subjective freedom, a reversal that, for Heidegger, unlike Hegel, is not only unproblematic but also actually a desideratum.¹⁶ Whether Heidegger's stance on the pastness of art should qualify as pre-¹⁷ or post-modern¹⁸ may be the topic of further investigation, but, in the light of the proposed comparison with Hegel, it certainly qualifies as anti-modern, with significant consequences on the function and place of the right of the subject's freedom.

Such consequences can be better appreciated in the light of two further remarks. First, Heidegger's exemplary artworks and art forms in *The Origin of the Work of Art* may be contrasted with the Hegelian ones. Heidegger's main reference is the Greek temple, that is, a paradigmatic architectural work made by a closed community for a closed community, where the individual subject does not play a substantial ethical or aesthetic role, neither as a creator nor as a recipient. Heidegger's temple is the symbol of a foregone yet longed-for world in which modern subjective freedom is unknown and which instead "assigned those who came there to celebrate the god a place in the world it established".¹⁹ For Hegel, architecture is indeed the "first" art in the strictest sense, yet exactly because of its fully "objective", material character its spiritual content and determination is strongly limited, compared to "later" arts. Its exteriority and heaviness are distant from both the harmonious fullness and ideal interpenetration of subject and object of classical sculpture and the depth, intimacy, and humour of the individual-oriented romantic arts (painting, music, and poetry). Therefore, even though Hegel, like Heidegger, associates artistic antisubjectivism with the possibility of art's highest, truth-bearing function, one should not forget that such truth is, for Hegel, just the concrete freedom of the subject. In terms of spiritual significance and aesthetic value, Hegel, unlike Heidegger, favours artworks and art forms in which the power of the subject's freedom shines through.

Secondly, let us also consider the two authors' stances on the relationship between art and philosophy in general. Antisubjectivism suffuses Heidegger's very claim of the superiority of poetry over (traditional, i.e. metaphysical) philosophy. His claim is related to his notion of unconcealment, as well as the strife between World and Earth. Unconcealment, the Heideggerian

term for truth, implies that truth is not to be equated, as in Hegel, with the potentially unlimited transparency of the subject's knowledge, in which the identity of thinking and being comes to the fore. On the contrary, first, unconcealment is not a human deed, but an Event happening to humans, and, secondly, it is inseparable from concealment: "Truth, in its essence, is un-truth".²⁰ This essential element of closedness, obscuration, concealment, which is embodied in Heidegger's concept of the Earth as resistance to openness and disclosure, entails an antisubjectivist – one may even say "antidemocratic" – claim, insofar as it implies the impossibility and, in fact, the undesirability of an open, transparent, universal access to truth. This is just what makes poetry superior to metaphysical philosophy, which instead promotes complete transparency and universal access to truth. Conversely, Hegel's reason for attributing philosophy a primacy over art is exactly the former's universality and transparency, its potential openness to each and every inquiring subject.²¹ For Hegel, art, on the other hand, always contains an element of material obscurity that is not fully scrutable through thinking and as such is not a fully suitable form of expression for subjective freedom. Even from this point of view, Heidegger's attempt to revise Hegel's judgement on the pastness of art reveals an encompassing antisubjectivism that is not presented, like in Hegel, as a necessary condition of the irretrievably lost, highest, and truth-bearing function of art, but rather as a possibility of, and as a hope for, a radically new beginning.

Gas Chambers and Hölderlin's Poetic Antisubjectivism

Heidegger's confrontation with poetry in general and with specific poems or poets in particular needs therefore to be read from the angle of that possibility and hope. This statement acquires a particularly dramatic character in the case of the "failed" or "missed" encounter with Celan, the suicidal German-speaking Jew, Shoah-survivor, and hermetic poet, with whom Heidegger, at least for some time a staunch supporter of National Socialism, held an ambiguous and frustrated exchange. As I will show, such exchange can act as an excellent touchstone for the significance of the thesis of art's past character, shedding light on implications way beyond the Hegelian spectrum, while substantiating the topical value of its Hegelian framing. I will contend that, despite sharing substantial concerns about the modern dominion of technology and the modern "aesthetic" concept of art, Celan departs from Heidegger as to the role that poetry (and art in general) can and should play in our time, especially on the background of the historical experience of the Shoah. Such departure, as I will further argue, is implicitly but structurally linked to diverging views of the philosophical-poetological place of the subject, which ultimately lead to irreconcilable views of the ethical-political role of the post-Shoah subject.

To begin with, let us spell out in more detail the concrete meaning of Heidegger's poetic antisubjectivism. Heidegger equates poetry to authentic art, namely art that is not the artist's genial or capricious handiwork, but a place in which truth is unconcealed and on which the artist and the artwork rely: "All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings, is, *in essence, poetry*. The essence of art, on which both the artwork and the artist depend, is truth's setting-itself-into-work".²² Briefly, "art is, then, a becoming and happening of truth",²³ and therefore it is wholly opposed to the metaphysical split between the subject and the object, that is, to "modern subjectivism, [which,] of course, misinterprets creation as the product of the genius of the self-sovereign subject",²⁴ and which is the groundwork for the dominion of technology. Poetry is a non-objectifying language, as long as we are able to conceive of it and of art in general not in the modern sense, that is, as individual production, but in the original Greek sense of *techne*. The original, authentic meaning of art has nothing to do with the "making" of a subject: "As knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, τέχνη is a bringing forth of beings in that it brings forth what is present, as such, out of concealment, specifically into the unconcealment of their appearance. τέχνη never designates the activity of making".²⁵

The centrality and urgency of this "antisubjectivism" in Heidegger's poetics become even more glaring when applied to Hölderlin's poetry. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, for Heidegger, listening to Hölderlin's poetry may have been the only way to avoid the horrors and the annihilation that Celan's poetry tries to confront.²⁶ For Heidegger, modern subjectivism, the whole Western history of the metaphysics of presence, art as the making of a subject, and the unchained dominion of technology are just different aspects of the same constellation, to which Heidegger refers as *das Ge-stell*.²⁷ "The production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps"²⁸ also belong to such constellation. For Heidegger, the Shoah is ultimately an outcome of the Western metaphysical-subjectivist-technological compound. Neither ordinary nor metaphysical language can tackle it without being soaked up into it: only truly poetic language could have prepared a way out.²⁹

The point about poetic antisubjectivism can effectively be developed in the light of a passage from the ending of Heidegger's lecture on Hölderlin's hymn *Der Ister*, according to which Hölderlin's "poetizing does not revolve around the poet's own ego. No German poet has ever achieved such distance from his own ego as that distance that determines Hölderlin's hymnal poetry".³⁰ This poetry, rather than being rooted in the poet's ego, is defined by such a distance from the poet's ego as we cannot find in any other German poet. Hölderlin does not put his own ego into poetry: on the contrary, he puts the greatest distance between his ego and his poetry.

This, Heidegger continues, is the very reason why his poetry has a hard time finding the right kind of audience:

This is the real reason why we of today, who despite all “community” remain metaphysically, that is, historically entangled in subjectivity, have such difficulty in bringing the right kind of hearing to encounter the word of this poetry. What has for a long time hindered modern, contemporary human beings, who think in terms of self-consciousness and subjectivity, from hearing this poetry is simply this: The fact that Hölderlin poetizes purely from out of that which, in itself, essentially prevails [*west*] as that which is to be poetized.³¹

The human beings of our time have a way of thinking and a view of the world and of themselves that entirely revolves around self-consciousness and subjectivity. This very fact prevents them from listening to Hölderlin’s poetry, which only comes out of that which in its essence has to be poetized, not out of his particular ego or subjectivity. Furthermore, since our time is the time of the unrestrained dominion of technology and subjectivism, even our concept of art has fallen prey to such dominion. For us, art is a leisure pursuit, a hobby, at best a cultural phenomenon or the subject of an aesthetic experience, pleasure or investigation. If an artistic expression or product does not serve such purpose nor neatly fits in the compartment set aside by modernity for art, we have a hard time embracing that art. It feels as if we were stuck in a circle: only authentic poetry can save us, but in order to listen to that poetry we should already have been saved. Vis-à-vis this circle, Heidegger’s statement from the *Contributions to Philosophy* should not come as a surprise: “The historical destiny [*Bestimmung*] of philosophy culminates in the recognition of the necessity of making Hölderlin’s word be heard”.³² Although philosophy itself cannot even articulate its fatal shortcomings (as proven by the “failure” of *Being and time*), it can at least endeavour to give a voice to the only language that can tell absence. Indeed, its very mission is to accomplish this.

Celan’s Hope

Heidegger’s poetic antisubjectivism heavily rests on his reading of Hölderlin. Another poet, this time a contemporary of Heidegger, challenges this view while sharing some of Heidegger’s most topical concerns. Celan’s ambivalent attitude to Heidegger has been emphasized by scholars in different contexts.³³ The poet’s indebtedness to the philosopher is undeniable³⁴ yet so is the force of his criticism. Such force feels particularly aggressive in the draft of an unsent letter to Heidegger written by Celan in the last five months of his life: “You . . . have decisively weakened that which is poetic

[*das Dichterische*] and, I venture to surmise, that which is thinking [*das Denkerische*], in the serious will to responsibility of both".³⁵ Lyon claims:

Though [Celan] failed to state explicitly how Heidegger's powerful influence had compromised both poetry and thought, the clearly implied cause was his involvement with the Nazi Party and his failure to publicly write about it after the two men's first meeting in 1967 as Celan had hoped.³⁶

However, the tone of Celan's accusation does not seem to be outright political. The quoted passage sounds confrontational at a philosophical level, in the way poetry and thought, and their responsibility, are understood and practised by the two authors. In order to make sense of such philosophical contrast, especially the connection implicitly or explicitly established by the two authors between the concept of poetry and the understanding of its political responsibility, I will look into two very different texts by Celan, both fundamentally related to Heidegger. First, the poem *Todtnauberg*, written right after his encounter with Heidegger in 1966 but published in 1970, and called after the location of the philosopher's famous hut in the Black Forest, where the meeting took place, and, secondly, the *Meridian* speech (the 1960 Darmstadt acceptance speech he gave in response to his winning the Georg Büchner Prize).

Todtnauberg reads:

Arnica, eyebright, the

draft from the well with the
star-die on top,

in the
Hütte,

written in the book
– whose name did it record
before mine? –,
in this book
the line about
a hope, today,
for a thinker's
word
to come,
in the heart,

forest sward, unleveled,
orchis and orchis, singly,

raw exchanges, later, while driving,
clearly,

he who drives us, the mensch,
he also hears it,

the half-
trodden log-
trails on the highmoor,

humidity,
much.³⁷

Although here it is impossible to try to decipher the poem in any depth, two things stand out even at a superficial reading. First, the ample use of spatio-temporal references and naturalistic descriptions. Secondly, the undertone that gives cadence and structure to the whole poem, namely a hope. My reading of the poem, admittedly neither an exhaustive nor an exclusive one, revolves around the connection between such two aspects. I suggest that such connection is made explicit by Celan himself in his *Meridian* speech. Scholars agree that the *Meridian* speech is to a good extent a critical confrontation with Heidegger's concept of poetry and art:³⁸ it is therefore useful to link it with the poem that retells that material encounter.

In the first part of his speech, Celan takes a stand against art and poetry. Art is viewed as an artificial, technical activity, which – along Heideggerian lines – can be aesthetically admired even just as an “automaton”³⁹ without human content.⁴⁰ As such, “art creates I-distance”⁴¹ and produces a self-forgetfulness, which however is not positively felt in the Heideggerian antisubjectivist sense, but rather negatively in the Heideggerian sense of *Gestell*.⁴² On the contrary, poetry is a momentary interruption of the *Gestell*, “an *Atemwende*, a breathturn”⁴³ making place for the “estranged I set free *here* and *in this manner*”.⁴⁴ The I is liberated not by the mechanic artifices of art, but by the estrangement of poetry.⁴⁵ The freedom warranted by poetry is not, however, unrestrained arbitrariness. The main constraint is imposed on the poem by historical dates: “Perhaps one can say that each poem has its own ‘20th of January’ inscribed in it? . . . But don’t we all write ourselves from such dates?”⁴⁶ Thus, every poem is historically marked: it is neither (with Heidegger) the arbitrary and capricious manifestation of the poet’s ego nor (against Heidegger) the opening place of an I-transcending truth. Instead, the poem oscillates between the two poles of inescapable, tragic historical determination at one end, and the poet’s sheer, irreducible individuality at the other end: “But the poem does speak! It stays mindful of its dates, but – it speaks”.⁴⁷ While mindful of its dates, the poem cannot be reduced to them: it speaks, it says something else and something more than the experience marked by the

dates. Being tied up to and determined by dates does not prevent the poem from being free, but such freedom comes in the form of estrangement, of a “breathturn”.

In this way, the poem can advance hope:

I think that it had always been part of the poem's hopes to speak on behalf of exactly this *strange* – no, I cannot use this word this way – exactly *on another's behalf* – who knows, perhaps on behalf of a *totally other*.⁴⁸

Hope, one of the central elements in *Todtnauberg*, is also central to the *Meridian*:

Perhaps an encounter of this “totally other” kind with a not all too distant, with a very close “other” is . . . thinkable – thinkable again and again. The poem carries and tests the wind [*verhofft*] – a word related to the creaturely – through such thoughts.⁴⁹

The hope is hope for an encounter, “a word related to the creaturely”, and for conversation: even “desperate conversation”.⁵⁰ It is a desperate, extreme hope, as today “the poem shows, unmistakably, a strong tendency to fall silent”.⁵¹ The poem lives at the edge between complete silence, that is, annihilation, and word, that is, existence: “The poem stands fast at the edge of itself; it calls and brings itself, in order to be able to exist, ceaselessly back from its already-no-longer [*Schon-nicht-mehr*] into its always-still [*Immer-noch*]. This always-still can only be a speaking”.⁵² Since, however, speaking belongs not only to poetry but to art too, in Celan's negative sense, the next step is to specify what sort of speaking this is, that is,

not just language as such, nor, presumably, just verbal “correspondence” [*Entsprechung*] either. But language actualized, set free under the sign of a radical individuation that at the same time, however, remains mindful of the borders language draws and of the possibilities language opens up for it.⁵³

Here Celan opposes to the Heideggerian semi-passive conception of language as “correspondence” (*Entsprechung*) to Being the idea that the poem that truly speaks and is truly “always-still” is actualized, liberated language manifested by and manifesting a radical individuation.⁵⁴ More precisely:

This always-still of the poem can indeed only be found in the work of the poet who does not forget that he speaks under the angle of inclination of his Being [*seines Daseins*], the angle of inclination of his creaturliness. Then the poem is . . . one person's language-become-shape

[*gestaltgewordene Sprache eines Einzelnen*], and, according to its essence, presentness and presence [*Gegenwart und Präsenz*].⁵⁵

Hence, the two elements highlighted in *Todtnauberg*, namely the ample use of spatio-temporal references and descriptions, and the hope that gives a structure to the poem are indeed connected, in the following way. The poem struggles to pull itself back from the “already-no-longer” into the “always-still”. The “always-still” is speaking in the sense of actualized language: language that, on the background of the possibility of total annihilation and horror, tells the “always-still”, the enduring existence and experience of the individual, momentarily congealed into a poetic word.⁵⁶ In this sense, it is also language set free: it is the free, open, actively hopeful word of an existing individual against the always-lurking possibility of the “already-no-longer”. The “always-still” is only made possible by such radical individuation, by the emphasis put on the particular existence and even on the physical finite nature (creaturliness) of the poet. Celan strongly, desperately lays claim to the right and force of individual existence and its particular, radically individualized spatio-temporal situation, both against the homologizing and totalizing risk of an artistic-technological abstraction *and* against Heidegger’s claim that words and truths are independent of the poet’s ego.

A Poetics of Individuation and a Utopia

The ambivalence of Celan’s stance on Heidegger is thus brought into sharp focus. On the one hand, Celan clearly agrees with Heidegger in denouncing the dehumanizing, totalitarian character of modern technology and of its artificial language. On the other hand, he openly rejects Heidegger’s antisubjectivism and argues for the impossibility to disentangle radical individuation from the authenticity of language, as opposed to Heidegger’s idea that it is language that speaks, not the author. As Lyon points out, the parting between Celan and Heidegger “becomes noticeable when Celan sets out to restore the subject to modern poetry, a subject that in Heidegger’s writings had come to play an almost nonexistent role”.⁵⁷ Celan’s speech purports to present the poem as “one person’s language-become-shape, and . . . presentness and presence” as spatio-temporally situated individual language, which gives shape to the irreducibly free, particular, and contingent existence of the individual author, on the background of the possibility of total annihilation.⁵⁸ So, Celan’s anti-Heideggerian defence of the here and now has a deep philosophical meaning. Heidegger’s reference to the unconcealment of Being via Hölderlin ultimately results, from Celan’s point of view, in a denial of the constraints imposed by history with its unforgiving dates.⁵⁹ Heidegger still refers to art as essentially poetic, without really questioning the very possibility of poetry itself after the Shoah. On the contrary, as Fóti argues in Derrida’s footsteps, for Celan

“as the mark of a significant historical conjunction, as historical signature, the date marks the implacable resistance of the historical to hermeneutical appropriation”.⁶⁰ Heidegger’s hermeneutical appropriation of Hölderlin’s poetry can be read as an attempt to overcome the constraints imposed by historiography (and, clearly, by the Shoah in the first place) on the poem’s power to unconceal the truth, a truth which is conceived of as superior to and independent of historical dates. In this way, Heidegger ultimately tends to neutralize history and the Shoah.

What is more, Heidegger appropriates Hölderlin in the name of a “homecoming”, of a (German) return to a (Greek) origin. This is, however, obviously not possible for the Shoah-survivor and exiled Jew Celan. Again, the point is not just biographical. Heidegger’s hermeneutical strategy implies a neutralization of the geographical-historical duress and reality of the Shoah, and his poetic longing for rootedness, as symbolized by the Todtnauberg *Hütte* itself, ignores not only the condition of the exiled Jew⁶¹ but that of the post-Shoah subject as well. For the latter, the experience of alienation and displacement is not just a momentary accident but a structural condition, and authentic language is only possible as estrangement. While Celan tries to address this condition and find ways in which the subject may still speak and be heard, Heidegger is simply not interested in a conversation with that subject and his (desperate) being here now. In disagreement with Heidegger’s monologic concept of language and in the footsteps of Martin Buber’s dialogic one,⁶² Celan construes the poem as essentially tending to some “other”:

The poem wants to head toward some other, it needs this other, it needs an opposite. It seeks it out, it bespeaks itself to it. Each thing, each human is, for the poem heading toward this other, a figure of this.⁶³

This tension towards the other is then characterized as “attention”, not in the sense of an instrumental focus, but as inner concentration.⁶⁴ In this way, “the poem becomes . . . the poem of someone who – always still – perceives, is turned toward phenomena, questioning and addressing these; it becomes conversation – often a desperate conversation”, where the addressed “brings its otherness into this present”.⁶⁵

The poem looks for the precise time and place of the encounter with the Other, even with the absolute Other:

Even in this here and now of the poem – for the poem itself, we know, has always only this one, unique, momentary present – even in this immediacy and nearness it lets the most essential aspect of the other speak: its time. When we speak with things in this way, we are also always confronted with the question of their where-from and where-to: a question that “stays open”, “does not come to an end”, that points toward the

open, empty and free – we are far outside. The poem, I believe, searches for this place too.⁶⁶

To be sure, Celan's anti-Heideggerian rehabilitation of the "immediate" spatio-temporal dimension is not to be understood in the sense, criticized by Heidegger, of physical measurement and calculation. Instead, the "place" pursued by the poem is in truth a non-existing place, that is, literally, a utopia revealed by the poem's attention: "And once, due to the attention given to things and beings, we also came close to something open and free. And finally, close to utopia".⁶⁷ This utopia, this non-existing place, is at the same time the origin and the destination. The poem tracks routes from the poet's origin to his destination, but, not only as a result of the Shoah, "none of these places can be found, they do not exist".⁶⁸ Nevertheless, while looking for non-existing places, the poem and its author are "always-still", safe from the non-existence of the "already-no-longer". While looking for places that cannot be found because they do not exist, the poet has found something which, just like language, is "immaterial, yet terrestrial, something circular that returns to itself across both poles while – cheerfully – even crossing the tropics: I find . . . a *meridian*".⁶⁹ The proposed reading of the *Meridian* speech confirms Celan's philosophically and not just biographically motivated ambivalent attitude to Heidegger. Celan wants to bring the subject back to poetry (as opposed to Heidegger), yet he is also mindful (like Heidegger) of the nihilistic implications of an objectifying language. The subject and his spatio-temporal situation are not just affirmed in their presence: Celan's poetic endeavour is to portray them in their absence, silence, obscurity, from which the poem calls them back into the "always-still".⁷⁰ The poem thus portrays or, more precisely, is constituted by the unexpected, recalcitrant re-emergence of the individual from absolute darkness and annihilation.

The Thinker's Silence and the Philosophical Permanence of the Shoah

We can now go back to *Todtnauberg*. I have already hinted at a connection between the two visible elements of the poem, namely the naturalistic description and the accuracy of the spatio-temporal setting on the one hand, and the attuning feeling of hope on the other hand. My reading of the *Meridian* has, I believe, strengthened such connection. This, however, not in the sense of an affirmative presence of the subject in the poem: as a matter of fact, Celan's "I" only appears, in *Todtnauberg*, through the possessive "mine", referring to his name written in the same guestbook which previously recorded the names of Heidegger's "accomplices". The conversation itself is only a "raw exchange", the importance of which is

elliptically stressed by the reference to the driver and only witness to the encounter, the scholar Neumann.⁷¹ The poet's "attention" to the spatio-temporal circumstances tries to open a space, however obscure, silent, and estranged, for the encounter with the Other. The Other is, in this case, I suggest, the dark side of Heidegger's (and Germany's) past and his continued refusal to publicly confront it, and Celan's hope is "for a thinker's word to come". I want to emphasize here that "a thinker" is not just a circumlocution for Heidegger's name: again, there is a philosophical point here. As we saw, Celan accused Heidegger of having weakened both poetry and thought in terms of responsibility. Celan's hope "for a thinker's word to come" means that Heidegger's coming word is not just expected to be the clarifying, univocal warning of a controversial yet authoritative public figure. It is also the philosophical acknowledgement that certain philosophical tenets are potentially dangerous, first and foremost the attempt to (re)attribute to poetry an ultimate veritative power, which goes along with a weakening of the relevance of individual existence and of the dialogic essence of language. Celan reaches this conclusion despite substantially sharing Heideggerian concerns: hence, his attempt at a non-objectifying language, that is, a poetry that can tell absence and danger. However, Celan is perfectly aware that his poetry – or any poetry – is not enough to ward off such danger. There needs to be a philosophical accountability, a direct, open, dialogic engagement with the present moment. For Celan, Heidegger's coming word should turn into a philosophical readiness to engage in a discourse "here and now", clearly addressing past and present responsibilities and dangers.⁷²

Celan's hope, as we know, was dashed: Heidegger's word never came. A number of personal, psychological, and political explanations might be invoked. Once again, however, I insist on the philosophical core of the "failed" conversation, and, more in general, of the troubled Celan-Heidegger relationship. Celan

shows himself convinced that Heidegger's refusal to speak to the here and now, to speak as a human being addressing himself to the Face of the Other, constitutes a refusal of the "coming/word" to be expected of a thinker. This refusal also cuts short a genuine interlocution between poet and thinker (one which would respect the alterity and the "time" of the poet).⁷³

The unreconciled opposition between Heidegger's involvement in National Socialism and Celan's desperate yet hopeful search for Heidegger's public word stems from such deeper opposition. In this sense, *Todtnau-berg* cannot be fully reduced to an "anti-Nazi template".⁷⁴ Even though, of course, such template always lurks in the background, one needs to

appreciate the philosophical groundwork to assess the full import of the ambivalence of the relationship. Heidegger's obstinate silence is certainly, in Celan's eyes, a particularly painful and bewildering instance of Germany's general silence, or even "expedient amnesia",⁷⁵ about the Shoah and the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the 1950s–1960s. Yet, Celan does not blame Heidegger on purely political grounds.

Heidegger's reasons too are more philosophical than political. In fact, not only Celan's hope but also Heidegger's silence have to be philosophically interpreted. Sympathizing with Celan's hope "for a thinker's word to come" would have, from Heidegger's point of view, legitimized the very reasons of the historical events he was asked to condemn. In other terms, for Heidegger to sympathize with Celan's desperate hope would have involved a self-contradiction, that is, condemning and distancing himself from the historical events of National Socialism in the name of a subjectivism which, in Heidegger's eyes, constituted the very root of the dreadful outcome of National Socialism. The only rescue might (have) come from an altogether different approach, and Hölderlin was the way there. But this is so precisely because, as we saw, Hölderlin is for Heidegger the antithetical poet par excellence. Celan chooses a different, in many respects opposite, model of poetry, revolving around the idea of radical individuation, *and* he hopes for a redeeming word by Heidegger, when in fact for Heidegger such choice and such hope are mutually exclusive. A poet of radical individuation cannot and will not save us from the catastrophic compound which has led to those very events for which the same poet is now asking "for a thinker's word". Hence, I believe it would not be unfair to say that, in thwarting Celan's hope, Heidegger is not just – or maybe not at all – acting cowardly and avoiding responsibilities. On the contrary, Heidegger is being philosophically consistent, and one could even say that Celan, by choosing a poetics of radical individuation, thwarted Heidegger's hopes just as much as the opposite is true.⁷⁶ Therefore, the main point is, instead of explaining – and condemning – Heidegger's silence on personal-political grounds, to point out some philosophical tenets which may look perfectly reasonable or even attractive in themselves, but can hardly be disentangled from their problematic implications.⁷⁷ Understanding how Heidegger, in Celan's eyes, weakened both poetry and philosophy in terms of responsibility is only possible by philosophically unravelling, as I tried to do, their different philosophical views of poetry and the subject as the true motive behind the scenes of their unresolved dialogue. To this effect, as I hope I have shown, the present of art's past character, which in its Hegelian formulation is the general backdrop to and the target of Heidegger's confrontation with poetry, can fruitfully be employed as a touchstone and, indeed, as a compass for our orientation. Even though Celan's theoretical statement on, and own practice of, poetry are not directly related to Hegel,

his poetry can be read as a particularly dramatic, though constructive, instance of the art of “formal subjectivity” as presented in the previous chapters, and thus of the present of art’s past character.

Notes

- 1 Heidegger 2000, 21.
- 2 Heidegger 2014, 21.
- 3 The inherently political dimension of this task is stressed, among others, by Jamme 1984, 200; Pöggeler 1977; Harries 2009, e.g., 172. More recently, Bambach 2013, 7–8, has focused on the issue of justice with respect to Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism as well as in the context of post-war Germany. According to him, Heidegger’s interpretation of Hölderlin delineates a concept of justice as a non-human event, that is, as “a non-moral, nonjuridical *dike* [which] is nothing other than the limits of the human being against being itself. . . . Justice as adjustment to being, as fitting-into the fit of *dike*, points to a realm of balance and equipoise that happens ‘beyond good and evil’ in a way that cannot be configured by the figurations of human will”.
- 4 Clearly, Heidegger’s critique of the aestheticization of art and of artistic subjectivism is situated in the larger context of his criticism of metaphysics itself. In the space of this chapter, I will not be able to directly address this topic, which remains however in the background of my argument. See Siani 2012a; Harries 2009; Thomson 2015.
- 5 Gethmann-Siefert 1988, 218.
- 6 For a much broader and in-depth discussion, see Siani 2020a.
- 7 Heidegger 2002, 50.
- 8 Heidegger 2002, 51.
- 9 Heidegger 2002, 51.
- 10 “For Hegel, artworks and the past character of art are something conceptualized, not problematic at all. The interpretation and conceptualization of art fall on philosophical consideration. For Heidegger, by contrast, art’s domain of questions and the possibility of reinterpreting the pastness of art are open in the consideration of artworks” (Schwenzfeuer 2011, 165).
- 11 Heidegger 2002, 51; Geulen 2006, 122–123, points out that Heidegger’s confirmation of Hegel’s thesis for the time being institutes “a shift”, and in fact “a tension . . . between text and afterword, Hölderlin and Hegel, art and aesthetics, origin and end”.
- 12 Heidegger 2002, 52. See also Ziegler 1991, esp. 338–345.
- 13 Heidegger 2002, 51–52.
- 14 Heidegger 2002, 52.
- 15 “Admittedly Heidegger does not decide on Hegel’s thesis of the end of art, yet nonetheless he breaks with its dictum, insofar as he disputes the sublation of art into philosophy” (Schwenzfeuer 2011, 171). Thus, against Hegel’s construction, Heidegger “keeps open the possibility of a different beginning, determined as a new relationship of poetry and thought, and investing the (possible) future of art as an originary world-founding happening of the truth” (172). Significantly, Schwenzfeuer also suggests an analogy between Heidegger’s stance on the end of art and Schelling’s defense of a highest role for art in, for instance, his *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

- 16 See Harries 2009, 187: “Unless we can step beyond our modern world, Heidegger here is saying, we have to agree with Hegel. And for art that would mean that the aesthetic approach would have the last word”.
- 17 See, for example, Gethmann-Siefert 1988.
- 18 See, for example, Thomson 2015.
- 19 Harries 2009, 121, who also remarks that, of Heidegger’s two further main examples, Van Gogh’s shoes and Meyer’s poem, “neither establishes a world that we are able to inhabit. In this respect both are very different from the Greek temple . . . Both turn their back on our modern world”.
- 20 Heidegger 2002, 31. See the comments by Pippin 2014, 105: “There is, to be sure, an obvious immediate difference between them, since Hegel understands this event as much closer to an intentional deed or action (a collective social practice), a *result* of some collective human effort, provisional in its meaning and subject to a great deal of possible social contestation, and Heidegger clearly means metaphorically something much more like an event in the normal sense, a storm or a blast of wind (more like something that happens to us than something we do). But what sets Heidegger off from Hegel most dramatically is that for him, any such philosophically significant revealing or ‘unconcealing’ event, precisely because it is so much like a happening, is also just thereby a concealing or obscuring”.
- 21 This is, to be sure, a simplified account: see Siani 2020b for a broader discussion.
- 22 Heidegger 2002, 44.
- 23 Heidegger 2002, 44.
- 24 Heidegger 2002, 48.
- 25 Heidegger 2002, 35.
- 26 On Heidegger’s and Celan’s “writing on the disaster”, see Von Chamier 2001.
- 27 See the Bremen lecture with the same name (Heidegger 2012). The word *Gestell* ordinarily means “framework” or “enframing”, though the English translator in the edition used here chooses “positionality”. On these topics, see also Siani 2020c.
- 28 Heidegger 2012, 27.
- 29 I agree with Bambach 2013, 7–8, 99 ff., 171 ff., that Heidegger’s interpretation of Hölderlin delineates a concept of justice as a non-human event. This is also why Heidegger does not and cannot believe in the post-war restoration of justice by the Allies, which appears to him “as the mere continuation of NS machination (*Machenschaft*) caught in the frame of the *Gestell* that was everywhere leveling modern existence in the epoch of technology” (Bambach 2013, 54).
- 30 Heidegger 1996, 165.
- 31 Heidegger 1996, 165.
- 32 Heidegger 1999, 297.
- 33 See, for example, Bambach 2013. For a broader discussion of this part of the chapter, see Siani 2019c.
- 34 “It is not too much to say that Celan went to school with Heidegger and could be counted among his most serious students” (Lyon 2006, 215).
- 35 Quoted in Lyon 2006, 207.
- 36 Lyon 2006, 207–208; see also 187.
- 37 Celan 2014.
- 38 “Celan, meanwhile, would soon embark on what counts as his most significant public response to Heidegger – his ‘Meridian’ speech. Among other things, it would simultaneously be an acknowledgment of his debt to the

- thinker and a declaration of independence from him" (Lyon 2006, 107). See also Fóti 1992, 99.
- 39 Celan 2011, 2.
 - 40 See Cameron 2014, 4 and 100.
 - 41 Celan 2011, 6.
 - 42 See, however, Miglio 2005, 141–142.
 - 43 Celan 2011, 7.
 - 44 Celan 2011, 7.
 - 45 The subversive character of this turning, or "revolution", of breath is emphasized by Di Cesare 2012a, 189. See also Cameron 2014, 106.
 - 46 Celan 2011, 8. On the meaning of the "20th of January", the date marking both the poet Lenz's walk through the mountains addressed by Celan in his speech and the 1942 Wannsee conference that gave way to the "Final Solution", see Bambach 2013, 196 ff.
 - 47 Celan 2011, 8.
 - 48 Celan 2011, 8.
 - 49 Celan 2011, 8.
 - 50 Celan 2011, 9.
 - 51 Celan 2011, 8.
 - 52 Celan 2011, 8–9.
 - 53 Celan 2011, 9. Joris translates *Entsprechung* as "analogy", which I changed into "correspondence".
 - 54 See Jamme 2017, 165; Derrida 2005, 4 on the poem's "logic of individuation".
 - 55 Celan 2011, 9. Here, as in other passages, Celan clearly borrows Heideggerian terms (*Dasein*, *Präsenz*, etc.) in a (partly) anti-Heideggerian fashion.
 - 56 This is also in line with Celan's understanding of poems as "crystals . . . in which the experienced time has consolidated into language" (André 2001, 212).
 - 57 Lyon 2006, 127.
 - 58 See also the interesting observations by Von Chamier 2001.
 - 59 Here, I cannot touch upon Celan's own reading of Hölderlin.
 - 60 Fóti 1992, 104; for Derrida 2005, 16, "a date functions like a proper name". See also Di Cesare 2012a, 191: "Remaining mindful of the date means freeing the poem from every presumed a-temporality in order to emphasize its extreme temporalization".
 - 61 Bambach 2013, 3 and 195: "Celan will take up the Heideggerian-Hölderlinian *topos* of remembrance or *Andenken*, but in a radically different and deconstructive sense. Abjuring Heidegger's philhellenic idyll of an Odysseus-like 'poetic homecoming' as the 'proper' task of the poet, Celan will rather seize on the Levinasian theme of Abrahamic exile as a way to contrast the German-Jewish experience of remembrance". Bambach 2013, 233, also mentions the devastating outcome of Celan's extreme, dashed hope for a "homecoming" to Jerusalem.
 - 62 See Cameron 2014, 193; Miglio 2005, 66–67, and, on the problem of language after Auschwitz, Di Cesare 2012a, 197 ff.
 - 63 Celan 2011, 9.
 - 64 "The attention the poem tries to pay to everything it encounters, its sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of the 'tremors' and 'hints,' all of this is not, I believe, the achievement of an eye competing with (or emulating) ever more precise instruments, but is rather a concentration that remains mindful of all our dates" (Celan 2011, 9).

- 65 Celan 2011, 9.
66 Celan 2011, 9–10.
67 Celan 2011, 11.
68 Celan 2011, 12.
69 Celan 2011, 12. I agree with Di Cesare 2012b, 33 that Celan’s “radical displacement becomes the condition of a new freedom”.
70 This strive is present in the *Meridian* speech itself. See Cameron 2014, 5: “In ‘The Meridian’ the silences make themselves felt as ominous, or ‘awkward’ – like those halts in conversation which make evident what conversation is often designed to cover up: the physical presence of the other, of a fellow-mortal. In ‘The Meridian’ Celan was particularly interested in emphasizing his own physical presence before this audience”.
71 See Lyon 2006, 184.
72 To Heidegger’s philosophical wait for the coming word and the Event, Celan opposes the desperate urgency of the “now”. See Bambach 2013, 224; Cameron 2014, 68.
73 Fóti 1992, 106. See also Di Cesare 2012b, 34–35.
74 Lyon 2006, 178.
75 Bambach 2013, 199.
76 Lyon 2006, 170: “It seems, ironically, that [Heidegger] was the one who was frustrated and disappointed” by the meeting.
77 For a development of this criticism, see Siani 2012a, 2020a, 2020c.

8 No Code Aesthetics

This final chapter goes well beyond Hegel by addressing a topic that could hardly be further from him and that might in fact make some readers turn up their noses, namely *No Code*, the 1996 album by the grunge rock band Pearl Jam. Of course, a philosophical interpretation of a piece of popular culture is nothing particularly scandalous or original, yet the distance between Hegel and this particular work is so big that the whole attempt may seem rather pointless. Actually, as it happened throughout the book, the goal is always to defend and further develop Hegel's thesis as something relevant to our time. With this in mind, a discussion of some more or less directly related authors and works, as in the previous chapters, is a prerequisite but it is still not enough. We need to step far out of the Hegelian comfort zone and contrast Hegel with things that not only look non-Hegelian but also look non-philosophical. Clearly, in the pursuit of such goal, the choice is almost unlimited and, to some degree, inevitably arbitrary. Pearl Jam's *No Code* is only one of the countless instances of popular art that could be measured against Hegel's thesis. It is, to my knowledge, an original connection, but hopefully not a wild choice. Indeed, the main reason for choosing just this instance of popular art is the potential contradiction between its title statement (*No Code*) and the risk of this very statement actually turning into a code in its performance (through both lyrics and music), a risk that is paramount in contemporary art and that can be critically addressed with reference to Hegel's thesis, which, in turn, gains a distinctively original profile. My interpretation of Pearl Jam's album focuses on its apparent inconsistency and lack of organic unity, and on the general atmosphere of dissolution, contingency, and heterogeneity it is pervaded with (1–2). I read these features not as a sign of a temporary artistic loss on the side of the band, but, on the contrary, in terms of a paradoxical project, poised between the bold rejection of codes and the risk of this very rejection becoming a new code (3). In doing so, I establish a connection between the underlying intention of the album and Hegel's thesis, arguing that *No Code* can be read as an enlightening, concrete instance of the latter,

and that, vice versa, using the thesis as an interpretive framework can have a therapeutic effect, which may help deal with the feeling of bewilderment the album can trigger. This finally leads to the outline of what I call a “no-code aesthetics”, acting both as an upshot of this book and as an overture to future continuations (4).

Immanence, Instability, and the Possibility of Nihilism

No Code, Pearl Jam’s fourth album (1996), is usually not considered to be among the band’s most successful ones, in both artistic and commercial terms. Despite this, or maybe, as I will argue, just for this reason, *No Code* offers some stimulating philosophical starting points, both in its general concept and in the songs it contains. In particular, it will allow me to further qualify two “constructive”, emancipatory aspects of the thesis of art’s past character already emerged throughout the book. First, the past character of art also implies the liberation of the individual subject with his particularity and contingency, no longer required to harmonically fit in a given, substantial ethical whole. Art no longer expresses a unified worldview to which the individual can adhere through its fruition. The foundation and orientation of the public sphere requires more complex and reflective practices than the ones any artwork can provide. This, however, does not mean that art has become irrelevant: rather, art itself now calls for a more mediated, discursive approach for its interpretation. This further implies the centrality of the right of the individual subject to freely interpret, question, or even ignore the messages proposed by any given artwork. Second, and conversely, art, having been released from its absolute divine-expressing or truth-bearing task, can now be fully human, and freely express all the possible particular and contingent facets of humanity without being bound to specific forms and contents. Art’s nearly boundless expressive freedom is a result of the weakening of its highest claims and reflects the plural character of the modern public sphere, but does not necessarily result in unqualified relativism. As we will see in the particularly controversial case of *No Code*, it is still possible to connect aesthetic appreciation not just to sensible pleasantness however conceived, but also to the expression of specific, humanly relevant contents and meanings that require instead disharmonic configurations.

Let me hence move on to a focused discussion of some main traits of *No Code*. My aim will be to link the title with the album’s concept and execution in the songs, highlighting thereby its central, paradoxical intention. “No code” is a polysemic expression, even more so in the elliptic context of a music album’s title. It is, first of all, a programmatic existential declaration, marking the lack or rejection of preordained rules and boundaries for the declaring individual, in this case Pearl Jam. Accordingly, every

individual existence and action is unique, contingent, and incommensurable with others. In the same way, it is an artistic reclamation of freedom and independence from genres and expectations. This reclamation is then linked to a rejection of mainstream commercial discographic labels and practices.¹ But “no code” also points to a survival strategy: changing skin and shape and becoming unrecognizable in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the collapse or “normalization” of a certain kind of music and culture, most notably of the original grunge movement.² At the same time, finally, “no code” is also used as a synonymous for the medical “do not resuscitate” code,³ which in this context can be read as an invitation to let the past (of the band, and of that specific music and culture) go, but also as an ironic blow to hard-line purist fans. The openness and ambiguity of the message sent by the title is, of course, one of the components of the fascination exercised by the album itself. The ambiguity, however, seems to run even deeper, as all the dimensions of the title’s meaning can be read as trail signs towards new codes: the rejection of all codes can, as a matter of fact, be read as a code. This deeper ambiguity is the main interpretive key of the reading I suggest.⁴

The multidimensionality of the “no code” statement can be tracked all across the album’s lyrics. A general implication is the rejection of all dimensions of sense and purpose transcending the very present moment. “Who You Are” tackles the issue of the part the individual subject plays in the great scheme of things, collapsing the nature and purpose of existence into what the individual immediately is. Our part is simply who we are, undercutting any reference to a further level of signification transcending this immediate identification. If individual existence and identity are conceived in this way, then also the possibility of transcending the immediate self through knowledge is ironically dismissed and brought back to naturalistic patterns and immanence in “In My Tree”, where knowledge is likened to a growing tree. Not only am I identified with my present existence, but also my very knowledge – traditionally, a distinctive human trait – cannot project me above it: in fact, knowledge is seen as just another process of nature, and the subject of that knowledge as just another object in nature, resulting in an exhilarating lightness.

Time itself, the core constituent of our self-feeling, self-consciousness, and personal identity, becomes volatile and elusive, as temporal references and personal identities get mixed up and neutralized in a crossing of verses from different songs, from “Red Mosquito” (“If I had known then what I know now”) to “I’m Open” (“If he only knew now what he knew then”). All of this eventually leads to an implosion of the self, this only apparently steady foundation and substance of individual existence. The self as such is no longer the secure, self-evident groundwork for existence and action, but, in a reversion of the Cartesian argument, it is made of the

stuff of dreams, on which however the subject seems to have an odd decisional power, being able to dream up his new self ("I'm Open"). Dream is no longer the omnipresent illusion threatening the stability of identity, knowledge, and action, but the very source of the self, which consequently shrinks to an inanimate, infinitesimal, unnoticeable serial object, like an anonymous book among many on a shelf ("Sometimes").

The power of dreams and illusions remains, however, limited, hence the suspension of the self has dark, disturbing implications. Without transcendence, purposiveness, and an identifiable self, the only remaining horizon is that of finitude and the always-lurking possibility of annihilation, a theme pervading the album from "Red Mosquito", written by a severely food-poisoned Eddie Vedder, for whom the mosquito becomes a threatening devil visiting him, to "Lukin", inspired by the danger of an obsessive armed stalker. Dreamt or not, the individual self put forward here is just as much vulnerable and finite as the real one it aims to replace, and the presence of death remains inescapable. Even love, often conceived as an eternal bond transcending finitude and death, gets bitterly and sarcastically scaled down to a socially inflated, yet largely insignificant achievement: all our bonds are made out of obligation, and love is just a matter of luck for the few ("Hail, Hail"). Like love, also the confidence and the long-established rituals of an old friendship are predictably, structurally marked by an existential before material strain of transitoriness and instability in "Off He Goes". Eventually, the strain creeps from the inside to the outside, pervading the whole world and humankind like a universal pattern of absent-minded fakeness and fabrication ("Mankind").

Openness, Care, and New Life

However, the pervasiveness of finitude and precariousness leads not only to pessimistic or even nihilistic conclusions. Even the suffocating enclosure of illusion and universal meaninglessness can, once acknowledged and deciphered, open an inner door restituting sense to the universe and the self. Paraphrasing the Kantian correspondence of starry sky above and moral law within, the blankness inside and the blankness of the ceiling of a closed room (a permanent cell?) can lead one to a statement of openness ("I'm Open"). Despite, or maybe because of, the irreparable ("no tradebacks") discovery of universal illusion and the feeling of loss of all sense, being authentically open (without the obligations, patterns, and fakes seen in the previous paragraph) is still possible for humans. Hence, the precarious openness of finitude contains the flipside to the universal meaninglessness and nothingness, that is, an equally important element of emancipation, releasement, and hope, giving voice among others to songs such as "Present Tense" and "Around the Bend". "Present Tense" is an anthem

to immanence and self-determination, a *memento mori* and a *carpe diem* in the same breath. The tree is here not the metamorphic shape of the self, but its source of wisdom and inspiration for dealing with constitutive and inescapable finitude, teaching us to catch the sun's rays, that is, to "get something out" of the perilous, demanding life's trip. The lesson we can learn is expressed through a radical dichotomy of orientation, with a pretty clear-cut choice between past regrets and present tense. When every other approach is deemed to fail, we just need to realize that we can forgive ourselves and that we do not need a justification for our decision to embrace full immanence.

This heartfelt call for immanence may look like a cover for self-indulgence and boundless egoism, which is however balanced by a sense of fragility and openness, and the need to take care of it. We see this, for example, in the sweet, moving care for the vulnerability of new life and the profound desire to protect it inspiring "Around the Bend", where the still-lying father sings a lullaby for the moving baby and his future walk of life. In the presence of the fragility of this new life, self-forgiveness is no longer enough and the caring father needs an impossible forgiving and validating word and light to come from the innocent, silent new-born. Even the elliptic, sharply metallic refrain of "Smile" contains a message of openness and hope of reconnection and happiness, as the title itself makes evident. Thus, the acknowledgement of finitude and precariousness goes hand in hand with the rejection of codes and the affirmation of the free, incommensurable, irreducible character of individual existence.⁵ This affirmation, in turn, opens the door both to the possibility of egoism, permanent dread, and nihilism, and to that of care, love, and hope. In this sense, we can already witness a similarity between the intention of the album and that of the thesis of art's past character: both of them, in concomitance with an "end" and a "no", announce a new "beginning" and a "yes".⁶

Is "No Code" a Code? In Search of a Non-harmonic Paradigm

The lyrics of *No Code* thus stay true to the album's overall intention, in that they confirm the infinite possibilities of a life lived beyond prefixed codes. The same can be said of the musical choices giving body and expression to that intention. As already mentioned, both the admirers and the (more numerous) critics of *No Code* have pointed out its heterogeneous, disharmonic musical composition. This is undubitably true even at a superficial listening. We go from the soft, detached intro tunes of "Sometimes" to the loud, aggressive smashing of "Hail, Hail" and "Habit", from the more classic rock of "Red Mosquito" to the alternative percussions and exotic sitar of "Who You Are", from the dazed "I'm Open" to the Neil Young-esque "Smile", up to the pensive, moving ballad tunes in "Off He

Goes” and “Around the Bend”, the furious, howling “Lukin”, the drumming exhilaration of “In My Tree”, the slow yet powerful “Present Tense”, and the easy-going, singable “Mankind”. No doubt, the album constitutes a break from previous Pearl Jam material, a break that perplexed, to say the least, several fans and critics.

Different facets of what it means to be human are well displayed through the words as well as through a kaleidoscopic variety of musical choices. While this shows the band’s profound sensibility and maturity, from a philosophical point of view it may seem a rather non-exciting, or even trivial observation. It gets more exciting, however, when we realize that this sensible and appealing conclusion is in fact problematic, as it risks contradicting the very programmatic intention motivating it. Briefly, the “no code” statement risks becoming a code itself, and the programmatic declaration of the liberated, incommensurable nature of individual existence risks becoming a codified, normalized platitude, if not just yet another imprisoning “habit” pretending to be our friend (“Habit”). Would this reversal nullify the “no code” statement, or would it be its utmost, consequential application? In other words: does the “no code” motto call for its own consequential application, at the risk of creating a new code, and hence of contradicting itself, or does it call for a self-violation, and hence, again, for a self-contradiction and nullification? We seem to have come to a sort of variation of the classical, “liar paradox”: any attempt to assign a truth value to the sentence “I am lying” seems to result in contradiction. Analogously, if “no code” becomes a new code, we have a contradiction; if we want to avoid this result and hence violate the “no code” statement, we will need to put forward a code, resulting again in contradiction. Similar paradoxes have been extensively debated in the history of logic.⁷ Here, however, we should keep in mind that *No Code* is an artwork, not a logical investigation. Therefore, we need to consider the very artistic means in which that statement, and the contradiction it apparently leads to, is embedded.

I argue that, while *No Code*’s overall impression of chaos and disharmony persists also on a deeper level of listening, it is possible to trace a pattern and an intention behind the apparent chaos. This is in fact already suggested by the album cover, consisting of an apparently random collage of photographs which, when opening the cover, act like tiles of a geometrical mosaic. While one may dismiss *No Code* on the ground of a lack of harmony and consistence, I suggest that such lack reflects the intention (whether conscious or unconscious, it does not matter here) to create a non-harmonic paradigm. This paradigm, in turn, is motivated by the difficulty raised earlier: it is an aesthetic response to an apparently unsolvable existential (and logical) antinomy. The unpredictable, even bewildering mood, tune, and style shifts in *No Code* can be read as a consistent

rejection of codes and rules not only in life in general but also in art in particular. This “unmusical” musical choice is of particular importance as it also reminds us that art as a human practice has the capacity, and one might even say the “call”, to operate this rejection, unlike most other practices in human life, which are for good or bad regulated by stringent networks of codes, conventions, rules, and so on. In this sense, *No Code* aesthetically acts as a non-harmonic, emancipatory paradigm, and as a bold statement of independence. This independence statement stops short of nothing and no one, not even when faced with the dangerous stalker from “Lukin”. Finally, independence is also reclaimed as an attitude of personal consistency and capacity to keep moving despite the growing misery (or “bullshit”) all around (“Off He Goes”).

But *how* exactly is art able to perform a statement of independence without falling prey to a new codification? Or, we may also ask, *which kind* of art is able to do so? I want to suggest that the successful aesthetic strategy advanced in *No Code* can be read as an instance of art after the end of art. Certain forms of art do of course respond to a need for codification, not only in aesthetic but also in cognitive, ethical, political, and religious terms: again, let us think of classical Greek or medieval Christian art. A Greek tragedy or statue, a Medieval cathedral or altarpiece were expression of a relatively unified worldview, structured around beliefs, norms, customs, traditions, and so on, which constituted the content, the formal principle, and the *raison d'être* of the artwork.⁸ The artwork was, in short, a medium of transmission of normative contents, of collective and cultural identification, and of ethical and religious orientation.

This is clearly not the case for a work such as *No Code*, not only for obvious content and style differences but also because of a structural discontinuity in the role art is called to interpret, and hence in the very formal principle regulating artistic messages. *No Code* does not (and cannot) transmit binding principles, it does neither require nor call for identification for its fruition, and it does not provide ethical or religious orientation. While this may be true of most modern artworks, at least in Western culture, a work such as *No Code* embeds this proposition in its very conception and execution, more so than the previous Pearl Jam's works. The sense of bewilderment and disorientation it provokes on the listener is, accordingly, not the result of a moment of artistic confusion or random experimentation, but, on the contrary, the consequential result of its inner principle of organization, namely the “no code” proposition. To be sure, one could argue that, in this way, the codification of the proposition is just moved to a different level, but in no way is it dispelled. However, I would like to resist this objection by pointing out in more detail the strategy displayed in the album and its connection with the thesis of art's past character.

For a No Code Aesthetics

Clearly, as we saw, there is a paradoxical dimension to the whole *No Code* project. Of course, there is also a paradoxical dimension to the idea of art after the end of art. While the two topics should be treated in their specificity, one common trait is that in both cases, we witness the attempt to transmit a message, without being caught in the web of codifications traditionally associated with that message. This attempt results in a structural dialectics, which, in my reading, should be taken as the very core of such artistic enterprises. First of all, as already mentioned, there is a dialectics of “no” and “yes”, of “end” and “beginning”. As a matter of fact, one can easily consider *No Code* as both a termination and a beginning point in the band’s career. This is true not only in a “biographical” sense but also as far as Pearl Jam’s poetics is concerned: the renouncement of their previous style became *itself* a new aesthetic statement.

Second, consistently with the thesis of art’s past character, *No Code* displays a strong dialectical tension between unity and dispersion: there is of course a leading, unifying idea, which is however refracted in a plurality of very different, apparently unrelated fragments, that is, the single songs. Admittedly, unity of multiplicity or multiplicity in unity is a classic characterization of beauty and artworks. Traditionally, however, this characterization points towards an idea of harmony: a beautiful artwork is the result of the harmonic, unified composition of its several different constituents, reflecting and embedding an equally harmonic and unified worldview.⁹ This is not the case for *No Code*, where the different constituents, namely the songs, can hardly be said to concur to build a beautiful harmony: in fact, the album, considered as the sum total of the songs, rather creates an effect of utter heterogeneity and disharmony. Neither can it be said that the unifying idea of the album, that is, the “no code” proposition, is fully represented or interpreted by any of its single songs. The album rather acts as a disharmonic mosaic and draws our attention to the tension between the single songs, as well as between the songs and the whole concept.

This brings us to a third, deeper level of analysis. While we can (and should) of course enjoy the songs and be aesthetically struck with the rich diversity of their styles and techniques, the album’s heterogeneity and tension can lead us to go a step further and question its motives (as I am trying to do here). A more harmonic, unified artistic composition, as we may find in previous Pearl Jam’s albums, would rather invite us to pure, immediate enjoyment, appreciation of the technique and the lyrics, and so on. In other words, it would invite us to a more unreflected contemplation of and identification with the artistic material. On the contrary, a disharmonic work, provided it is not just the result of poor technique, conception, or execution, challenges us to abandon this immediate, unreflected

level of enjoyment, and to ask for the reasons of apparently counterintuitive choices. In other words, it invites us to adopt a more reflective, problematic approach. While this does not necessarily result in a comprehensive philosophical approach, it shows us that such artworks are so to speak “incomplete” or “partial”, in that they require something else than an immediate aesthetic response. This structural reference to a philosophical or reflective approach is, as we saw, a characteristic of art after the end of art. *No Code* hence displays not only a tension between unity and difference but also one between engagement and detachment. Accordingly, an “appropriate” listening of the album’s tension between unity and difference calls for a continuous movement between engaged, immersive fruition and detached, reflective interrogation. This restless tension between different registers is the very creative core of the album, the *aesthetic* strategy employed to address the *logical* and *existential* difficulties we saw arising from its very proposition. In short, this is the main point of a *no code aesthetics*, of which, to conclude, I want to sketch some implications.

First of all, “no code” in the sense of “do no reanimate” can apply to art itself, if by “art” we mean art before its end. Art as the harmonic code and expression of a more or less unified worldview is gone because it no longer reflects our “highest” needs, broadly speaking. Attempts to reanimate it can either result in kitsch, as the surrogate of the search for ideal beauty in a context no longer accepting its grounds,¹⁰ or, worse, in a reactionary longing for a community marked by compactness and strong unifying values, in which the right of the subject’s particularity can be seen as a luxury, or even a threat.¹¹ The very disharmonic, plural, and open nature of art after the end of art, powerfully instantiated in *No Code*, calls for a more participative fruition on the side of the receiving subject, hence enhancing his reflective and critical capacities and substantially contributing to the formation of the modern individual. However, while the rejection of codes calls for a questioning of objective forms and contents, it does not mean the triumph of arbitrary, solipsistic subjectivity. We saw this with regard to some of the topics addressed in *No Code*, but this also applies to the issue of the “value” of the artwork itself. This also means that it is possible to put a price on the artwork and that a value can be negotiated even for such recalcitrant material. This is, to be sure, part of Pearl Jam’s “bet” with the album:

And they’re not so self-righteous as to deny that, yes, success has its privileges. For example, if you can’t put out a glorious, guiltless, mad-blend mess of tunes and weird tangents like *No Code* when you’re at the top, what’s the point of swimming through all the sewage to get there?¹²

The artwork's value is no longer an "absolute", inestimable one but, just like any other object for sale, becomes the result of a negotiation following different and even clashing logics.

In this sense, while one may certainly disapprove of this "objectification" and "monetarization" of the artwork, we should also be able to acknowledge that the latter does not by any means exclude the possibility of the permanence of the aesthetic element in the cultural industry. The possibility of a purely aesthetic fruition is recognized as one of the many elements contributing to the nature and value of an artwork, yet not as the necessarily predominant one. This undermines art's and artists' anachronistic, aestheticist, and elitist claims, contributing to an aesthetic democratization (which, admittedly, often turns out to be massification and consumerism) by instituting an open, even anarchistic dialectics, in which different or contradictory needs and dimensions are bound to find always precarious balances and rest positions, thus enhancing art's possibilities. Admittedly, there is some optimism in this conclusion, and the possibility of an ultimate loss of value or purpose peculiar to art (i.e., of a proper "death" of art) cannot be prejudicially dismissed. However, the many, ancient and new, philosophical dark prophecies to this effect have shown themselves to be even more prejudiced – as well as wrong. Claiming the present of art's past character all the way up to a Pearl Jam-inspired no-code aesthetics is meant, among other things, to keep those prophecies that way.

Notes

- 1 Here belongs of course the famous 1994 Ticketmaster fight, on which see Boehlert 1995.
- 2 Also from the point of view of the context of its elaboration and release, hence, *No Code* can be read as a perhaps unique opportunity of freedom, experimentation, and autonomy in the band's path.
- 3 Eddie Vedder himself hinted to this possibility (see Blasengame 2016).
- 4 Again, Eddie Vedder suggested that the reason the album is called *No Code* is that it is full of codes, which fans have obviously tried to uncover (see the webpage Pearl Jam Code Break 1999).
- 5 This is, of course, a theme pervading Pearl Jam's production also beyond "No Code": just think of "I am Mine" from the album *Riot Act* (2002).
- 6 In the last section, I will further qualify and develop this analogy.
- 7 For a first overview, see Beall, Glanzberg, Ripley 2016.
- 8 Once again, this is obviously an overly general depiction relying on a Hegelian standpoint, and should not be used as a factual description of specific artworks.
- 9 This is what Tatarkiewicz 1972 famously called "the great theory of beauty".
- 10 See, among others, Eco 1989.
- 11 That is, something like Heidegger's case as discussed in the previous chapter.
- 12 Fricke 1996.

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Note

- 1 If not indicated otherwise, translations are always mine. Emphasis in quotations is always in the original text.

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